

WORKS BY THE AUTHOR.

STORIES FROM OLD HISTORY. SONNENSCHN AND CO.
THE SOVEREIGNS OF ENGLAND.* SONNENSCHN
AND CO.

BERTRAM DE DRUMONT. KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH,
AND CO.

KINGSCOTE STORIES. KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, AND CO.

KINGSCOTE ESSAYS AND POEMS. KEGAN PAUL,
TRENCH, AND CO.

KINDERGARTEN SONGS OF THE SEASONS (12),
MUSIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, 54, Great Marlborough Street,
and MYERS AND CO., Berners Street.

* Appended to 'A First History of the English People,' by Amy Baker,
4 vols. See Advertisement at the end.

BERTRAM DE DRUMONT.

W MALLISON.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

BERTRAM DE DRUMONT:

BY THE LATE

ELLA BAKER,

AUTHOR OF

STORIES FROM OLD HISTORY, 'ESSAYS AND POEMS,' 'KINGSCOTE STORIES,'
'THE SOVEREIGNS OF ENGLAND,' ETC.

W. MALLISON.

Truly—'a sweet and holy soul,
Hath tints that never fly ;
While flowers decay, and seasons roll,
It cannot die.'

HERBERT.

LONDON:

KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, & CO.

1, PATERNOSTER SQUARE.

1888.

MEMORIAL PREFACE.

ELLA BAKER, who died 14th July, 1888, from the sting of a bee, which brought on sudden syncope thirty-three hours after, was born at Kensington 29th May, 1859. On the 10th July, 1860, her father, Thomas Baker, of the Inner Temple, removed to Kingscote, Wokingham, where the rest of her life was spent, with the few exceptions of seven short visits, of about a week each, to friends in London, Brighton, and Ilminster; and one stay of three months in the latter place. She had not a Collegiate education; circumstances detailed in her father's autobiography account for this.* Hers was strictly a home training, mainly under the guidance of her sister Amy, author of 'A First History of the English People,'† which work the younger sister assisted to embellish, by selecting the hundred mottoes to the heads of chapters.‡ These were furnished without an effort, during a few days, whilst pursuing her usual domestic avocations. Her memory, indeed, was truly wonderful, and greatly contributed to her extraordinary conversational powers; for when at her ease (she was very modest and retiring, seldom entering what is called 'society'), no subject could be started without bringing some most apt quotation from Ella's lips. She had mastered (self-taught) French,

* 'A Battling Life chiefly in the Civil Service.' Kegan Paul, Trench, and Co.

† Swan Sonnenschein and Co.

‡ 'The poetical extracts which stand as mottoes at the head of chapters,' writes a reviewer, 'are as apt and delightful as those of Sir Walter Scott himself.'

German, and Italian. Altogether she was highly intellectual, with a fine taste, and poetic imagination.

One instance of memory, when about thirteen years old, may be mentioned : repeating to a cousin, who had challenged her, the whole of 'The Lady of the Lake,' it was observed that many words were substituted for others in the original ; but in every instance both the rhythm and the meaning were correct. It was, therefore, in no sense a parrot recitation.

She never put herself forward. It is believed that not a single composition of hers intended for publication exists, but was done upon request—like 'The Sovereigns of England,' appended to her sister's history ; 'Kindergarten Songs of the Seasons,' and 'Stories from Old History' (all written at Amy's desire). It is much to be doubted whether she would voluntarily have published any of her writings. In truth her quiet unselfish life seemed almost solely devoted to attendance on her excellent mother ; yet, if Ella had any ambition, it was to do something towards improving and elevating the literary taste of the age, more especially as regards reading matter for young persons.

For the benefit of these, the following posthumous productions are published by a proud but sorrowing father.

T. B.

September, 1888.

N.B.—The year in which the piece was written is affixed to each.

BERTRAM DE DRUMONT:

A MEDIÆVAL TALE.

(1885.)

W. MALLISON.

CHAPTER I.

ALL was bustle and preparation in the household of the Baron de Drumont ; and as the early rays of the April sun shone down upon the castle court, they were reflected from the burnished steel of helmets and bucklers, swords and battle-axes. The air was filled with the clashing of arms, the neighing of horses, and the shouts of men ; while pages and men-at-arms hurried hither and thither executing commissions. In the midst of all the tumult, mounted on his bright bay charger, sat the Baron himself—calm, erect, motionless, with his keen, quick eyes taking note of all that passed ; watching, observing, ordering, with brief, decided tones, the arrangements of the cavalcade which was forming.

Right before the gates of the castle there ran a narrow river : on one side of that river lay Normandy ; on the other, France ; and great was the joy of every youth in the company at the prospect of passing the narrow boundary, and seeing life upon a wider stage in France. Were they not to march under the banner of Philip Augustus against his English enemies, and had not every heart in that castle leaped with exultation, when the dominion of Normandy was wrested from the hands of

the usurping tyrant John, and transferred to the King of France ?

Raymond, Baron de Drumont, though by no means a handsome, scarcely even a well-looking man, presented, as he sat there in the full light of the sun's rays, an appearance by no means out of keeping with the rank and consequence he enjoyed ; at least, in the eyes of his followers. The flood of light which illuminated his countenance showed, indeed, that there was scarcely a good feature in his face ; but it also served to bring out and intensify the expression of command and dignity which the habits of a life-time had stamped upon it. The principal defect in his figure, its want of stature, was less apparent on horseback ; and his manner, though prompt and decisive, was singularly free from restlessness. Occasionally he inclined his head to speak to one of his squires, who stood at his rein—a man of middle age, grizzled, and weather-beaten, but tall and upright as a pine. This man's countenance was so scarred and seamed by the accidents of war, as almost to suggest the idea that he had been actually hewn in pieces, and the fragments reunited by the surgeon's art. Beside him stood the only child of the Baron, a boy of about eight years, in whose fair complexion and flaxen hair, unlike his father's, the type of his Scandinavian ancestors seemed to be revived, unless it indicated a nearer mixture of Saxon blood.

The child clapped his hands and shouted with delight at the gallant show, and then clamoured to be taken before his father, and sit upon his horse. At a sign from the Baron, the grim retainer lifted him up, and gave him to his father, who received the boy in his arms, fondly caressing and taking leave of him, and said as he restored him :

‘ Here is a charge, Stephen Runet, more precious by far than that of all my lands and vassals.’

‘ In that, as in all else, my lord,’ replied Stephen quietly, ‘ you will find a faithful steward.’

The train at last formed in order and rode out of the court, while those who remained behind stood in knots gazing after their comrades ; and now that the bustle

was over, feeling it dull and heartless work to be left to the routine of daily life, and the guarding of the castle ; while others went to reap all the glory of the wars. Little Bertram de Drumont clambered as well as he could up the wall which surrounded the court, in order to hold the horsemen in sight, and waved with all his might a tiny white flag which he had found ; and the Baron, turning back his head, smiled at this last glimpse of the child, with his face turned up towards the sky, and the little flag flourished proudly in the breeze ; and he waved his hand in answer. Then the party crossed over the river, and was soon lost to sight.

All that day Bertram was strangely excited by the martial sight he had witnessed. He strutted about with his head full of battles and marches, of waving plumes and neighing chargers ; he lingered around the suits of his father's armour, which had been left scattered about at his hasty departure, trying to lift the heavy swords and lances, and finally burying his little head in a great helmet, which dropped below his chin. Then he collected all the little boys of the place, who served as his play-fellows, and forming them into opposing armies, played at battles all the morning. At last, arming them with their bows and arrows, he led them across the narrow river into France, wading through the water though it reached to his knees ; and there, as proud as any paladin, he planted his miniature banner. Then in a sudden, wild freak of adventure, the boys scampered off further into the country like restive colts. Stephen's watchful eye noted this in the midst of his other cares, and his brow darkened. Briefly he commanded a young squire who had been left with him, and who chanced to be exercising his horse hard by, to ride after and bring them back. It was the work of a moment for the active young man ; and on overtaking the little troop, he caught up the young baron in his arms, set him before himself upon the horse, and instantly cantered back again ; leaving the rest to follow, which they were not slow to do.

'I see, sir,' remarked the young man, looking down, not without some pride of approval, into the bold face of his

little charge, 'that your father, the Baron, must take you in his company when next he rides to the wars, for you seem to have small taste for keeping garrison.'

'And so he will ; he promised it. I begged hard to go with him now, but he would not suffer me.'

The youth laughed, but resolved to keep a more watchful eye upon the boy, who was his own more particular charge.

There were those who wondered not a little why the Baron had entrusted the guardianship of all he possessed, and the still more important trust of his young son, to one of his own retainers, a man, too, of mean origin ; for Stephen Runet was no sapling from a noble stem, looking with impatience to the honours of knighthood ; but owed his position in the castle solely to the favour of his lord, whose foster-brother he had been. On the other hand, the Baron de Drumont might have found many a more fitting steward, it was said, among his own noble friends or relatives, who had all sworn over their cups that they would stand to him through all chances, and would aid him at need with sword or with counsel. But the Baron knew well that treachery sometimes lay hidden under velvet doublets ; and that vows spoken over the wine-flask melted away as heads grew clearer. His own mind was fair and honest, and he felt that he could not see deeply enough into the true ends and characters of his associates. He therefore resolved to place the trust in hands which had never yet failed him ; and went upon his march secure that he should find all well upon his return, or, should he never return, that all would yet be well.

Bertram had little regard for Stephen. His grim visage and curt manner repelled the child, of whom, moreover, he took little notice. He took all due measures for his safety, and never permitted him to ride abroad unless well attended ; but that done, the old squire left him entirely in the charge of his usual attendants, while his own attention was engrossed by the other important interests which had been committed to his care.

CHAPTER II.

It happened one day that Bertram had ridden to the outskirts of a forest which lay at no great distance from his father's castle, when he saw a large crowd of children of all ages and conditions, a few hundred yards before him. They had the appearance of listening with great attention to an address delivered by some person who was not then to be distinguished ; and Bertram gazed till his curiosity was strongly excited.

'Let us go,' he said, looking eagerly to the young squire who rode at his rein ; 'pray let us see what this can be, Philip.'

Philip, not at all unwilling, rode forward to a convenient place on the outskirts of the assembly ; the few men who accompanied him followed, and there they all stood silent spectators of the most extraordinary scene they had ever witnessed. Standing upon a hillock in the centre was a boy of from twelve to fourteen years of age, with shaggy hair falling over his temples, a pale spiritual face and large dark eyes, that seemed to glow and burn with intense fervour, and yet had a kind of wild glitter, which betrayed an unbridled enthusiasm. With hands now outstretched before him, now pointing upwards, or joined as though in passionate supplication, he stood exhorting, preaching, imploring, it would seem in tones which appeared as though they proceeded from some miraculous power, so deep, so thrilling, so penetrating were they. The vast mass of children who stood around him, pressing closely one on another in their eagerness, devoured every word that fell from his lips with a kindling excitement that promised almost to match his own. Some, especially among the girls, shed tears ; others, as he rose into a strain of triumphant prophecy, clapped their hands and shouted till their voices penetrated far into the forest ; some who were too young to understand, stood gazing with round wondering eyes, but yet with flushed cheeks and quick-coming breath.

'It is for us,' spoke the young orator—'for us that this

glorious triumph is destined ; it is for us alone to enter into the city of the Lord. Has it not been made manifest ? Have not the vast armies of warriors, nobles, and knights, who so many times have gone forth in their pomp and their pride—have they not been scattered and undone as though pursued by the vengeance of Heaven ? It is for the innocent hands of children that the glorious work is reserved, for in the Book of Life it is written : “ Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

‘ Do you fear the toils and dangers of the way ? Divine strength shall uphold our feebleness, and shall give us strength for the conflict, with savage men and raging elements, which must be our portion before we plant the cross upon the walls of Jerusalem ; and rescue from the hands of profane unbelievers the sepulchre of Christ.’

This was the substance of the discourse which met the astonished ears of Philip de Tourville, as he stood among the crowd of listeners on that sunny day ; though it was expressed in words of such burning ardour, as kindled Bertram’s cheeks and eyes with an answering enthusiasm.

‘ Let me go, Philip,’ he cried at last, trying to snatch away his bridle from the firm hand of his conductor. ‘ I will join with them ; I will follow him to Jerusalem, to the world’s end. Ah ! I shall carry a lance like my father, but I will not wait till I am as tall.’

Bewildered as he was, and perhaps not altogether free from the influence of the contagious excitement which surrounded him, the young squire yet threw his arm round Bertram, holding him close, and firmly refusing to allow him to dismount. As they listened further, however, to the inflammatory utterances of the young preacher, Bertram’s struggles and demands to be set at liberty became still more violent ; while even the resolution of his guardian almost wavered, and he began to wonder whether he was doing right in withholding the boy from so pious and glorious an enterprise as was here proposed to him, and whether it might not be sinful presumption to doubt that Divine assistance might be accorded to these children for the attainment of such an end. Just at this

moment however—and in that moment probably lay the child's salvation—a little group of horsemen was seen slowly winding round the outskirts of the crowd. It was soon apparent that they were of the household of the Baron de Drumont, and among them was Stephen Runet himself, whose affairs had fortunately led him past that spot on this occasion. He, like the others, had been induced to pause for a few moments, that he might understand the strange scene; but as soon as he perceived that Bertram was enchained among the listeners, he dashed forward instantly, and began rating De Tourville with all the force of a by no means unpractised voice.

'Art thou mad,' he said, 'to keep my young lord here listening to the distempered ravings of a dreaming peasant boy? He rides abroad for the pleasure of the chase, and that he may be perfected in all those knightly exercises befitting his condition; not to mingle with a disordered rabble such as this. Away to the castle with him straight; and thou wilt find better employ for him, I doubt not, than hearkening to these mad and foolish fancies. Truly, Sieur de Tourville, you are finely to be trusted with the child!'

The young man coloured with some displeasure; for though to a certain extent under the authority of Stephen Runet, he by no means forgot the distinctions of birth between them, and was inclined to resent any freedom of language. He made no reply, however, and it was Bertram who spoke:

'I will not go to the castle,' he said in a positive tone. 'I will march to Palestine, and help to win the city of Jerusalem, which all the kings and princes have been fighting for so long.'

'Truly, my fair boy,' replied Stephen, smiling, though he was both vexed and alarmed, 'that would be a glorious enterprise. And then they should make you King of Jerusalem belike, and you would wear a golden crown. But will you be content to turn your back on this fair Normandy, and never see your noble father more? What will he say, think you, when he shall return from the war and find no son to meet him?'

‘My father would be well content that I should follow the path of fame and honour in which he is ever urging me to tread. Philip has told me many a time how he marched to the Holy Land in a gallant army with the Kings of England and France ; and now I will go in this company and follow in his steps.’

‘By the hand of the brave De Drumont, then,’ replied Stephen in his most resolved tones, ‘you go not with my good-will ! And you, boys and young maidens, you were best leave this fooling, and begone home to your mothers. Is it where our own noble King Philip Augustus and the lion-hearted Richard have failed, think you, that it is for you to bear away the prize ? Go, I say, each one to your homes, and learn what is belonging to the state of childhood.’

The attention of the gathering had been diverted by the altercation as it proceeded, and the deep harsh tones of Stephen’s voice exerted to its full power now arrested all ears. The preacher fixed his penetrating glance full upon him, and replied with a dignity of bearing which might have become a bishop or a prince :

‘Mock not at my mission,’ he said ; ‘we shall fight not in our own strength, but by virtue of a commission from on High. If our arms are feeble, they shall be strengthened ; if our counsels are blind, they shall be enlightened from above. Therefore it is that we fear no perils by the way ; for he whom the Lord has chosen to fulfil His purposes, He will sustain therein. Seek not, then, to hold back one single arm from this holy work, for you fight against the appointments of Heaven.’

Thus did the peasant boy assert his high claims, and Stephen could not answer him. It came home to him then, what he had scarcely realized before, that frantic as their scheme might be—and none knew better than he how frantic it was—these children were in earnest, that they would really do this thing that they purposed. The crowd cast angry eyes upon the stranger who had come to interrupt their dream and treat their leader with contempt. Stephen Runet was dumb ; his habits of life had trained him to act, to command, but had left him totally

without power to sway the minds of others, and had conferred upon him nothing of that gift of persuasion which this boy appeared to possess in so fatal a degree. He was anxious, too, to remove Bertram from this dangerous atmosphere, for he was becoming alarmed on his account. The boy, indeed, was not a likely subject for that species of hysterical excitement which pervaded so many in the crowd ; but his self-will and reckless, daring disposition placed him in almost equal danger. Stephen, then, seized Bertram's bridle, and, turning the horses' heads homewards in spite of his passionate entreaties, kept up as rapid a pace as he could venture until they reached the castle gates. Arrived there, he took the child by the hand, and, closely followed by Philip de Tourville, went in search of the venerable priest, whose counsel he thought might be of use on such a matter.

'Good father,' he said abruptly, breaking in upon the old man's transcription of a pious manuscript which he was laboriously engrossing on vellum, 'I come to beg of you that you will clear my young lord's brains from some idle fancies which have found place there touching the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre, which, as you well know, is a matter too weighty for them. These are things that belong rather to you than to me.'

Father Paul laid aside his pen with something like a sigh, and then looked with astonishment upon the flushed and tearful countenance of Bertram, who stood regarding the old squire with looks of defiance.

'What is this that troubles you, my child ?' he said gently, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder.

'It is because I wished to join them to go to Jerusalem and fight in the crusade,' panted Bertram, 'and he will not suffer me. He says, because we are children, we are too weak. But we shall be strong ! You have told me—have you not, dear father ?—that all is possible with the Lord to aid.'

Stephen here interposed with a more lucid explanation ; and Father Paul fell into a muse, while his long thin fingers toyed among Bertram's flaxen curls.

'I have heard something of this,' he said at length,

‘that the children flock in crowds to the banner of the Cross, even as it was with their forefathers in the days of St. Peter the Hermit.’

‘They will never carry their zeal beyond France,’ said Stephen, all his incredulity returning when no longer under the influence of the stirring scene. ‘There are perils enough by the way, to scare them back like rabbits into their burrows.’

The priest shook his head. He was better acquainted with the constitution of the human mind, and the immense power which spiritual excitement possesses of swaying its emotions.

‘Doubt it not,’ he said, ‘these little ones will go on their way as fearlessly as the noble princes and cavaliers in former days ; and may the shield of Heaven be over them according to their great trust ! My son, I know not whether it may not be vain presumption on our part to doubt of it, or to seek to restrain the pious ardour of their pure hearts ; for has it not been said, “Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven” ? and may not those words bear a prophecy ?’

‘Father,’ answered Stephen, with an air at once of deference and a blunt firmness, ‘I am no clerk, nor do I meddle with that which touches me not ; and little do I know, saving of those things that concern my duty to my lord. But it would sort ill with that duty, methinks, if, when my lord should ask of me, “Where is my son that I left in thy wardship ?” I must make him reply, “He hath gone to Jerusalem in the train of a shepherd-lad, who came preaching a new crusade, but when and how he will return, I know not.” The Baron on his return may send him to Jerusalem if he will, or to whatever place may seem to him fit ; but for me, safe as I received him, so will I deliver him up. You will not tell me that I err in this ?’

‘The saints forbid !’ replied the good priest, with a little reluctance. ‘The just steward is faithful to his trust.’

This worthy man, simple and trustful as a child, and whose time had been spent much more in religious con-

temptation, than in intercourse with the world, cherished a secret hope of the success of this band of youthful crusaders ; and his heart sympathized with little Bertram's wish.

'And so say I,' said Philip de Tourville ; 'yet, pity it is to crush the first upspringing of knightly spirit in the mind of the boy. I could find it in my heart to grieve for him. It is a gallant and a holy errand on which they go, and how know we, as the father has said, that it may not be crowned with glory ?'

The young squire was not yet free from the influence of the scene of excitement he had just witnessed, which had taken a strong hold on his young and ardent mind. Stephen saw that the romantic chivalry of the younger man, and the pious enthusiasm of the elder, might render them less efficient and watchful guardians than he had looked for, and he therefore determined to rely on himself alone to protect Bertram from the perils which he now saw hung over him.

'I will go,' said Bertram. 'Dear Philip, I know you will help me,' he added, seizing his arm coaxingly.

'By my faith, not I,' replied the young man, laughing. 'It is Messire Stephen there who is your guardian and tutor, and in his own judgment he must deal with you. Nay, sir, it is no such mighty matter neither ; why, it went hard with me when the Baron, your father, willed it that I should stay with you in place of riding against the English ; but did that make me weep like a damsel for a lost linnet ? Come, you will never be a knightly cavalier if you cry when you are crossed, like a wilful child.'

'They shall not go without me,' persisted Bertram, with a stamp and a gesture of the hand, which reminded Stephen of the Baron when in anger. 'It is a holy errand—the father has said it, Philip has said it, and I will not be withheld. I am the son of the Baron de Drumont, and this is my father's castle, and none of you has the right to gainsay my word.'

The poor child, trembling with overwrought excitement, looked round to note the effect of his declaration ;

but when he saw that De Tourville only laughed to see how well he had caught the tones of authority, while Stephen half suppressed a grim smile, he threw himself on the floor in a paroxysm of tears. Stephen raised him gently enough, and said, anticipating a remonstrance from Father Paul :

‘ You are not lord in this castle yet, my boy, and you should not wish to hasten that day ; it may come too soon for us all. Father, I would that you could tell me somewhat of this great gathering. To me it seems like an elfish dream more than sober verity.’

Father Paul told all that he knew of how the children were drawn away from their homes to follow this new preacher ; and how parents found all prayers and restraints in vain, against the wild fervour which seemed to have taken possession of their hearts ; and Stephen drank in all with an attentive ear.

From that hour Stephen never left his charge by day or night. If Bertram rode, he was always by his bridle—he was beside him through all the various pursuits of the day, he slept across his threshold at night. Once or twice the boy attempted to break away in the course of a ride ; or to run across unnoticed if the drawbridge chanced to be lowered ; but the vigilance of his guardian was not to be cheated so easily.

Meantime, they had constant tidings of the progress of the children’s army ; and these could not always be kept from Bertram’s ears, when they had always the effect of fanning the flame of his enthusiasm. But his storming, or his tears, produced no more outward effect upon Stephen, than on the castle walls themselves.

CHAPTER III.

It was now the beginning of July, and Stephen began to anticipate with some pleasure the time of the Baron’s probable return ; for he would have been by no means sorry to be relieved from the weight of responsibilities

which did not sit lightly on him. It was, therefore, with no small satisfaction that he one morning received tidings of a troop of horsemen, which were to be seen approaching the castle. But his first glance served to convince him that they were not followers of the Baron de Drumont; but those of a far less welcome person, namely, the Count Hugo Fitz Gournay, a brother-in-law of the Baron; whose cognizance of three full moons was plainly to be recognised upon the pennon, which waved over the heads of the advancing party. Stephen, with a rather overclouded brow, directed the drawbridge to be lowered, and prepared to receive the count, muttering at the same time to De Tourville:

‘I would his evil designs had led him by some other road than this, this morning; I love not to entertain noble guests, and, before all, Count Hugo.’

‘I am with you, Messire Stephen,’ replied Philip; ‘it is an ill token, say I, when the moon rises at noonday. Still, we must use him with all reverence, for he is my lord’s kinsman.’

Stephen looked as if he stood in need of some such reminder; but he now succeeded in banishing a somewhat lowering expression, and when the count had ridden up, and said to him, ‘Good-morrow, sir squire, I come to hear of the well-doing of my nephew, and to certify myself that all things are ordered well in the absence of my brother,’ managed to reply: ‘I trust you will find them so, my lord.’ And he would at the same time have stepped forward to assist his unwelcome guest to dismount, had he not been anticipated by the more ready services of De Tourville, who had accompanied him with the good-natured intent of covering any, awkwardness or bluntness, by his own superior address; and thus aiding in what he knew was to Stephen a hard task.

Stephen’s patience was certainly tried that day; for the count remained in the castle for many hours, in the course of which he inspected every part of it, and was by no means sparing of criticism and advice, all delivered in a tone of authority highly distasteful to the old squire; who, between his jealousy of any interference from with-

out ; his rooted dislike of the Count ; and his fear lest he might displease the Baron by affronting so near a relative, was in no enviable mood. De Tourville, however, did his best to supply all deficiencies ; and laboured so successfully to please that Count Hugo prepared to take his departure, when evening was coming on, in a state of high good-humour. Stephen, who had been under some apprehension that he might intend to remain through the night, transmitted with great alacrity the necessary orders for departure.

‘How say you, my brave boy?’ said the Count, stooping towards Bertram before mounting ; ‘wilt ride with me home to my castle to play with thy cousins?’

Bertram, who did not love his uncle, and liked little to be thrown among a wild herd of boys, all older than he, who were disposed to domineer over him and thrust him into a position of inferiority, to which he was little accustomed, appeared on the point of uttering a denial ; but, after a little hesitation, answered that he would go.

‘Let him be equipped,’ said Count Hugo, addressing himself to Stephen. ‘I would take him with me for a few days.’

‘Pardon me, my lord,’ answered Stephen ; ‘the boy hath been left in my hands by the noble Baron, who charged me so straitly regarding him, that I dare not resign him, even to you.’

‘I will go with my uncle,’ cried Bertram, in the imperious tones he had learned of late to use. ‘Why do you stay me?’

‘Vassal,’ replied the Count, bending his brows in a haughty frown, ‘it belongs not to thee to dispute my purposes. But thou art as all men who have been set in places too high for them, and who so value themselves and their office, that they perceive not its just limitations. No more of this, and yield me up my nephew. Dost doubt me for a less fitting guardian than thou art?’

‘I doubt nothing, my lord,’ said Stephen, who had a fixed distrust of the character and designs of his guest, and who saw in a moment the advantage which might be taken of Bertram’s present excited state of mind, and the

dangers into which he might fall, by even any relaxation of the watchfulness which had surrounded him of late. Stephen knew that the Baron had many enemies, and reckoned his brother-in-law among the number. 'I doubt nothing ; but the charge is mine alone, and for what is under my hand my head should answer, if need were ; but I answer not for another. Nay, my lord, pardon my boldness if I have said aught that could give offence, where none was meant. Do but tarry till my lord's return, and he will, I doubt not, bring your nephew to your castle as you desire ; but, till that time I dare not—no, nor will not—resign him, were it to the King of France himself, for I judge him to be in need of the most watchful care.'

'By St. Hugo, Sir Squire!' thundered the Count, 'I will have the boy ; so trifle with me no more.'

'By all the saints you can name, Lord Count,' replied Stephen sturdily, 'you have him not ; so there is the word of a poor squire against a nobleman.'

'It were well,' said Count Hugo, looking round for Bertram with the intention of ordering his forcible seizure—'it were well indeed for thee to bear in mind that it is a noble to whom thou speakest. In the name of thy lord, whose brother I am, I command thee to yield up my nephew to me. Where is he ? I see him not.'

Stephen, who had a short time before given a secret signal to De Tourville to remove him—which had been immediately obeyed—replied with utmost *sang-froid* :

'For where he is, my lord, it is where you will scarce find him unaided. For yielding him up, it is in my lord's name that I resist your commands ; and I think you are not a firmer friend to him than I. Be assured, at least, of this, that into no hands but his will I ever deliver the child ; no, not if you should batter these stone walls about our ears, in witness of the love you bear your brother.'

The countenance of the Count, which had gradually darkened from the beginning of the dialogue, now assumed an expression so stormy, while all the evil fire of his nature seemed flashing from his eyes, that the members of his troop involuntarily trembled ; anticipating one of

those bursts of passion to which they were not unaccustomed.

‘Now, by St. Hugo!’ he burst forth, ‘I know not why I do not order thee to be cast into the moat, thou churlish, insolent knave! Nay, by heavens! but I will,’ and, turning to his attendants, he commanded them to lay hands upon Stephen on the spot. They, not insensible to the somewhat ridiculous position in which their master was placing himself, advanced with reluctance, and suffered themselves to be readily repelled by no very violent exertion.

‘For casting me into the moat, Sir Count,’ observed Stephen, with his grim smile, ‘it may hardly be done quietly, for I am, as you may see, not altogether without defence; and I scarce think you will care to provoke an armed contention between us. I pray you now to depart in peace, as you have come, for the sun sinks low, and you have far to ride.’

This view was so earnestly espoused by the attendants of Count Hugo, that he himself now began to perceive the necessity of proceeding on his journey. He turned to Stephen, and said sternly:

‘Remember, Sir Squire, favoured as thou art by thy lord, that I am the brother of the Baron de Drumont, and that such as I may not sustain insult lightly.’

Then, as Stephen answered nothing, he sullenly turned his horse’s head and rode over the bridge with all his company, leaving Philip and Stephen divided in opinion as to the nature and design of his visit. Stephen, out of his distrust and dislike of the Count, was firmly convinced that he had come there with no other end in view, than to get possession of Bertram, with intent to work him harm. Philip, on the other hand, loyal to his order, was perhaps a little scandalized by the scant ceremony shown by Stephen to a nobleman; and believed the visit to be simply what it pretended to be, while the fancy to carry the child away he attributed to a mere sudden whim on the part of the Count, exaggerated into a matter of serious importance by an opposition, which his haughty spirit could ill brook.

From some unexplained cause of anxiety or restlessness, Stephen could not close his eyes in sleep that night. Lying, according to his custom, so near to Bertram's chamber as to be aware of all that passed within it, he felt a vague sense of uneasiness which prompted him to even more than usual watchfulness. After some time the sound of light footsteps struck upon his ear, and in an instant he had passed into the room. There stood Bertram with the light of the full moon falling upon his childish figure and bent head, close by the window, looking down into the castle court below. At the first instant Stephen conjectured the meaning of what he saw. Bertram was fully dressed, even wearing his little velvet cap, with the drooping scarlet feathers falling over his hair; but what served more than anything else to convince Stephen that the boy's mind was bent upon flight, was the fact that he had his bow and quiver full of arrows, and above all, that he had fastened a cross formed of some red stuff upon his shoulder. It was not possible that he could have formed any such plan unassisted; and Stephen's quick eyes soon discovered that some person had attached to the window a ladder of ropes, by means of which Bertram seemed about to descend. He was only just in time to throw an arm round the boy's waist and draw him back, hearing at the same time a low voice from below recommending caution in the descent. Bertram did not yield himself a willing prisoner; but Stephen, kneeling on one knee, held him close with one arm, while with the other hand he drew a hunting-knife from his girdle, and deftly cutting the fastenings of the ladder, sent it down headlong into the court.

'What traitors are there,' he shouted sternly, 'who, under cover of the night, would steal away the child of their absent lord in secret?'

He was unanswered but for the sound of retreating footsteps, and his attention was now turned towards his charge, who had been thrown into a state of excessive agitation.

'There are no traitors there,' he exclaimed passionately; 'it is you who are the traitor—you who thwart my will,

and stay me with force. You who hold me back from a glorious enterprise. Let me go now, or it is you who are the traitor.'

'Softly, sir,' replied Stephen, 'and let me know who they were that came to your aid this night. No true followers of your father, I trow, nor good friends to you.'

'You shall not know,' cried Bertram, struggling with all his strength in the arms of his captor. 'Oh! if I were a man you should not cross me so. When I am lord of the castle you shall not be here. Oh! let me go!'

Anxious as Stephen was to penetrate the mystery of the ladder, he dared not leave the child, dared not even yet release him from his arms, fearing lest in his present state of ungovernable excitement, he might actually leap from the window upon the stones; therefore the old squire sat down, still holding him fast, and tried in his blunt way to soothe an agitation which began almost to alarm him. It ended as children's emotions usually do, in a violent burst of tears, till at last the little boy sobbed himself to sleep in the arms of the faithful friend he could as yet appreciate so little. By this time the early summer sun had dawned, and Stephen with great relief laid Bertram gently down upon the bed, and went to summon Philip, whom he directed to watch beside him, while he himself endeavoured to discover some explanation of the events of the night. He met with nothing to enlighten him, however; and after spending some time and temper in vain, he was obliged to give up the attempt, and returned to Bertram, for he had grown to feel uneasy when he was out of his sight.

The exhausted child slept long and soundly. When at length he awoke it was not far from noon, and the castle presented its usual scene of life and bustle. Bertram did not attempt to rise, but lay motionless and without speaking, to all appearance a different boy from the one who had struggled so violently for his liberty some hours before. Stephen tried to gain some intelligence from him as to whom he had persuaded to assist him on the previous night; but Bertram would not speak, or even look at him, and he soon ceased his questions. The truth was that

Bertram, who knew that the children's army was to proceed upon its march on the next day, had thought that by accompanying his uncle he might find a way of escaping to join them, but when this project failed he had managed to prevail upon two simple men-at-arms to assist him in his plan of escape, by appealing at once to their indulgence and their superstition.

It was still early in the afternoon when Stephen's ear was attracted by such martial sounds as seemed to denote the arrival of a numerous party. Shortly afterwards a body of horsemen wound round a steep hill which obstructed the sight, bearing among them the well-known and welcome standard, with the couchant stag which had been his pole-star on many a day of battle, and in the front rode the Baron, active and unharmed, as when he first went out from his castle gates some months before. With an exclamation of pleasure Stephen hurried to Bertram's side, saying :

'Come, come with me to greet the Baron, who hath returned with honour and fortune. Glad am I in my heart that he shall find you as he left you.'

It was Stephen's hand that held the Baron's stirrup before he had well had time to check his horse, and his was the voice that was first heard in tones of heartfelt welcome to his dearly-loved lord. But the instant after, Bertram had thrown himself into his father's arms ; and began to pour out in incoherent words all his complaints and indignation against Stephen, who stood watching the horsemen ride in as full of spirit and animation—though their gay bravery was tattered and tarnished—as when they had left the castle in the Spring. Still there were some gaps among their number, which made the old squire shake his head regretfully, and some tall fellows had come back with pallid faces and crippled limbs ; while many more had shrewd scars to show, which would last them for a lifetime.

The Baron was at a loss to comprehend the excitement of his little son ; and not having then much leisure to attend to him, he merely said a few soothing words, and turning to his nephew, Gaston de Drumont, who stood by his side,

directed him to take the boy with him ; to which Stephen quietly added a recommendation of particular watchfulness. The Baron de Drumont then turned his mind to the many affairs which called for his attention ; and it was not till later in the day that he asked an explanation from Stephen of Bertram's evident anger against him. The father's face was lighted with a smile of pride and pleasure as he listened ; but grew grave again the next instant, as he took the hand of his trusted retainer in his own, and thanked him for his care.

'I have heard of these strange passages,' he said, 'on my journey hither ; and truly has my heart been grieved to see the young and ardent hurried into dangers they know not of, by the dreams of fantastic folly.'

'I trust, my lord,' said Stephen with humility, that yet claimed excuse, 'that I have caused you no displeasure in putting, as I fear, some affront upon the noble Count Fitz Gournay, to whom, as your near kinsman, I owe all honour. You well know that when a man is driven hard in a combat, he must press upon his foe with equal force, if he would not give ground.'

The Baron's brow had clouded a little, but he answered rapidly :

'Nay, mine honest Stephen, thou art indeed a staunch and faithful steward. Not for a dukedom would I have had thee yield the boy. Yet Hugo has a haughty spirit ; he may resent.'

The presence of his father—who was the only person that could overawe his high spirit—together with the bustle and interest of the return of the warriors, served to divert Bertram's mind from the subject of the crusade, especially as his imagination was no longer fed by constant reports of its progress ; for it was long before any further tidings of that ill-fated expedition reached the castle.

At length a pilgrim entertained by chance brought news of it, telling of things in part witnessed by himself, in part gathered from the reports of others. The disastrous fate which had overtaken the helpless children ; how some perished on the way from privation and disease, more were slaughtered ruthlessly by the half-savage people

through whose territories they passed ; and many more were carried into captivity, and sold among the Moors ; all was detailed by the pilgrim with grief and horror, concluding with a bitter denunciation of all those of the faith of Mohammed, ' misbelieving dogs, or wolves rather, in whose ravenous jaws our tender lambs are devoured as readily as the parent sheep.'

The Baron, sitting in his great hall among his household, listened to the pitiful story with apparent calm, but with a fixed attention. It was in fact the result he had anticipated from the strange insanity. As he raised his eyes they fell upon Bertram, who stood near him, regarding the pilgrim guest with wide-open eyes of horror, and crimson-flushed cheeks.

'Thou perceivest, my son,' he said to him gravely, 'into what perils thy wild spirit would have led thee. See now how thou shouldst thank the kind friend who preserved thee from them.'

The child looked up at his father with a conscious expression, and the next moment ran to where Stephen was sitting at some distance, climbed upon his knees without speaking a word, and began to cover the weather-beaten cheeks with kisses. Stephen, astonished and somewhat touched, endured these caresses with a little embarrassment, and put him down with a muttered blessing. From this time the old squire displayed an ever-growing fondness for the boy, who had endeared himself to him by the spirit he had displayed, as well as by the anxiety he had caused him.

CHAPTER IV.

ON a beautiful evening in July, some two or three weeks after his return, the Baron de Drumont rode home from the forest with a joyous and laughing company. He had hunted from early morning through the day, had traversed dense woods which yet could not suffice to temper the excessive glare of a sultry sun, which was rendered yet

more oppressive by the rough, uneven ground, and the many obstructions of undergrowth which lay in the path. But now, as the sun was sinking low, they rode no longer basking in the stifling heat, but dripping from a summer shower, with dew-drops sparkling on their horses' manes, and the branches of the trees freely scattering their after-rain on all the ground beneath. The sun had now burst forth again in full splendour, while the refreshing interval which had revived the face of all external nature served also to raise the spirits of the young followers of the Baron, who himself condescended to join in their hilarity. Finally he turned his raillery upon Stephen, who rode behind him, the only silent man in the company.

'By the shade of Sir Tristrem,' he said, 'but I hold thee for the worst huntsman that ever wound a horn. Harken to me, good comrades, this is the only man among us all who has shown himself no true woodsman this day ; pronounce ye what shall be done with him.'

There was a moment's silence, for few cared to jest with Stephen, but it was broken by the suggestion from Philip de Tourville, that the defaulter should be doomed to dress the venison in person for their supper.

'Well said,' laughed the Baron. 'Philip hath given righteous judgment, and it shall be duly executed.'

Stephen, who never understood banter, growled forth a reply that he dressed no man's meat, and not the Baron's self should constrain him ; further demanding to know of what misdeeds he was accused.

'Nay, if thou wilt not,' replied his still laughing lord, willing to amuse himself yet further at his expense, 'I know thee far too well to use urgency ; but for thy faults, are they not numberless ? Tell me why didst thou, when thou hadst the hart at bay, draw back in the very moment when the spoil was secure, thereby opening a way for escape by which our quarry was lost to us ? Stephen, if thou hadst been a cunning huntsman thou shouldst, at least, have secured that hart.'

'And so I should, my lord,' replied Stephen, still surlily, 'had you not ridden up to me so close that I fell back to

yield my place, that you yourself might strike the deer. For his escape, I dreamed not of it, and should have judged him too much blown ; but did I not after despatch the next stag we ran down, my lord ?'

'Truly, didst thou,' replied the Baron, 'and thou didst gash his throat after so vile a fashion, as though thy hand had never grasped a hunting-knife ; and didst, moreover, announce thy triumph with so terrific a blast of the horn that the very dogs howled to hear thee. I would have thee to know, my good Stephen, that a butcher may cut the throat of a calf after he has felled it ; yet that doth not make him a freeman of the noble craft of venerie. Be content, therefore, and confess that thy woodcraft stands not on a level with thine other excellences.'

CHAPTER V.

AMID such trifling talk as has been described, the Baron and his retinue at last arrived before the castle ; but here the Baron halted, and fixed his eyes attentively upon a little train which approached at a slow pace from the opposite side. All observed the band of travellers, and while they were yet gazing, the Baron saw one horseman mend his pace, and ride rapidly towards him ; while his companions, who seemed to bear a litter in their midst, continued their gradual march.

At length the horseman rode up ; he was a handsome young squire, who, with great respect, craved to know whether he had the honour to stand in the presence of the noble Baron de Drumont.

'I am he,' replied the Baron briefly. 'If thou hast aught in charge, fair youth, deliver it.'

To him the young man answered, after reverent salutation :

'My lord, the news that I bear it irks me somewhat to unfold. My master, Sir John d'Harancourt, salutes you heartily by me, and prays for the sake both of Christian

charity and of your old and true friendship, that you will receive a spent and broken man as your guest, for that short space in which his mortal body will stand in need of hospitality or tendance, for he is sorely wounded, and would have his breath pass away among friends who were dear to his youth. He had, indeed, purposed a further journey ; but——’

‘The passing of his breath,’ interrupted the now grave and awe-struck Baron, impatient of further elaboration ; ‘and is thy master, then, so sick ?’

‘Unto death, my lord,’ replied the young squire mournfully, and would have added more ; but the Baron straightway set spurs to his horse and galloped forward, followed by all who were with him, to meet the advancing party. At the side of the litter he threw himself from his horse, and approached his friend with great eagerness of manner, while the attendants respectfully drew back to leave them unobserved. The wounded Knight raised himself a little from his recumbent position, and was received by the Baron in an embrace, which, though caution might diminish its strength, it could not bereave of its tenderness.

‘My noble friend,’ he said, ‘my brother in arms, and more than brother in love : how is it that I see you thus prostrate ? But be of good cheer, for I have in my castle a good father, who has such skill in leechcraft, as shall restore you in brief space to be the same puissant Knight who fought by my side in Palestine.’

‘Alas, my kind and valiant friend,’ replied the wounded Knight, with a faint smile, while his thin, white fingers held the brawny hand of the Baron in a lingering clasp, ‘if leechcraft could mend my case I might now ride on horseback ; but as they bear me now helpless and dying towards your hospitable castle, so surely, before many days are gone, shall they bear me to the grave.’

‘Face and voice are changed, indeed,’ said the Baron, surveying him mournfully. ‘And is it thus we meet after a ten years’ parting ?’

‘I am sorely wearied,’ said Sir John d’Harancourt ; ‘let us move on to the place where they may lay me down to rest.’

They advanced slowly as before, the Baron having already despatched a messenger to the castle that all might be in readiness. On their arrival, Sir John was lifted from the litter and conveyed tenderly, yet not without pain, into a pleasant chamber, where they laid him, white and exhausted, upon the bed. He had suffered much from the heat during that day's journey; and when they laid him down, and the Baron stood listening to his gasping breath, he was almost ready to think that his friend's presentiment of death was fulfilled too early, and that his last hour had, indeed, come. But Father Paul, who came prepared with all the simple medicaments at his command, succeeded to a great degree in restoring his patient; and assured the Baron that the end, though inevitable, was not yet so near, but might even be delayed some days.

Until late that night the Baron de Drumont remained by the sick couch, holding the hand of his friend, and left him not till he slept, under the soothing influence of some decoction of herbs administered by the good priest. Father Paul quietly disposed himself to watch by his patient throughout the night; but recommended the Baron to withdraw.

'To-morrow,' he said, 'will, I trust, find the noble Knight somewhat restored, and able to converse with you on the many things which lie near the hearts of long-parted friends.'

All that night Sir John d'Harancourt slumbered peacefully, while the priest sat watchful, but motionless, by his side, and one of his wearied attendants, who refused to leave him, stretched himself upon the floor, ready to be roused in case of need. When at length the Knight awoke, it was to fulfil the prophecy of amendment; and the Baron, on his return to the apartment, was astonished to see the improvement which had been wrought by a night's repose and careful tendance. At the time of his approach, Father Paul was engaged in those holy offices which more distinctly belonged to his calling, and, with a crucifix in his hand, recited prayers, to which Sir John was listening with half-closed eyes. The Baron paused upon the thresh-

hold till this ceremony was concluded, and then, striding to the side of the bed, grasped the hand which his friend extended to him with a smile, and exclaimed in hearty tones :

‘Said I not truly that my good priest should restore me the Sir John of ten years since ? In this one night, my friend, the traces of sickness have half left you. Courage then, it asks but patience, and the Father’s cares shall make you man again.’

He spoke in all the exultation of reviving hope, but Sir John’s melancholy smile told that he was not deceived, and Father Paul, by a meaning look, forbade the indulgence of sanguine expectations. Their serious glances recalled the Baron’s mind to its former state of apprehension. The sick man now entreated that he might be raised to such a position as to be able to enjoy the extensive view which the chamber afforded ; and the Father, after indulging his desire, withdrew to an outer apartment that the friends might converse together alone.

‘I must now let you know,’ said Sir John, ‘what cause leads me here in such pitiful plight to crave your shelter and friendship. Know, then, that it was in no even chance of knightly battle that I had these hurts, but I was foully surprised and set upon by a band of marauders, while passing through the forests of Germany. By the valour of my followers and the favour of Heaven, I escaped from their hands, but only in the plight you see.’

The Baron, who had already gathered so much from the attendants of Sir John on the previous evening, yet listened with attention to the repetition of their details, and then followed a pause of some moments. It was broken by Sir John, who said, as his glance rested on the bright landscape which lay before him :

‘Here, indeed, lies the fair and sunny land for which my heart has pined through many weary days of travel. Think’st thou, De Drumont, that there is in the wide world a country one half so bright and dear as our own beloved Normandy ? Or where lies the soil from which spring more beauty, valour, and just and high renown ? Little did I dream when stricken hard with anguish, and

journeying painfully through many a barren waste, that I might live to see again these laughing vineyards, these gay pastures, and green hill-tops ; and now can I part from life well content, since I die amid friends and kinsmen, and my ashes will rest in Norman soil. See, my friend, the fair scene which lies before us here. I am at peace now I behold it, yet can I not well imagine that the regions of the blest contain more of beauty and of joy.'

The Knight, as he spoke, gazed upon the winning prospect with all the love and contentment of one who sees his heart's desire fulfilled ; the Baron surveyed it with an indifferent eye. In that moment there was a bitterness at his heart which no beauty or harmony could soothe, and which could be no longer suppressed.

'You speak,' he said, turning to his friend with a vehemence which was almost reproachful, 'as one who has no further longing for life or action. Is, then, the lofty spirit of Sir John d'Harancourt so far subdued that he can speak of being content to leave this world of light and motion, of glory and of love, for the lonely darkness of the tomb ? Is it in the nature of any being to greet death with contentment ?'

Sir John looked at him with an expression of some surprise.

'Never before,' he said, 'have I seen the valiant De Drumont regard the fear of death, though I have stood by his side on many a hard-fought field. I would indeed that my life had met its close in open battle, rather than at the hands of vile peasant robbers, but for the rest I care not. My toils and conflict in the Holy Land may serve, I trust, as atonement for my sins ; and were it not for one care, which I confess weighs somewhat heavy upon me, I would go to the grave with as free a mind as ever I did to my pillow. Have I stood face to face with Death so many times, to fear the grasp of his hand at last ?'

'Thou art right, my friend,' replied the Baron, who was now himself again ; 'it was but the grief of thy loss that overmastered me. As thou say'st, I have valued life not at the worth of a lance's point amid the din of con-

flict ; but the face of Death shows more dreadful when he comes with lingering step to the silent chamber. But this is idle ; let me know what is that care which burdens thy last hours, for the offices of a friend may perchance remove it.'

The Knight shook his head, with a sigh.

'My burden is no other than that which weighs upon a father's heart, when he leaves his child defenceless. It is beyond the power of friendship.'

'I knew not,' replied the Baron, 'that you had been blest with children.'

'One little maiden,' said Sir John, 'did I leave in the Convent of St. Agnes, but a few leagues from hence, when I last quitted Normandy. Her age numbers but five years, and thou knowest, De Drumont, how it fares with such little ones, left alone in this wild world and bereft of a parent's care.'

'She falls into the wardship of the King, D'Harancourt,' answered the Baron ; 'and Philip Augustus is a great, and, in the main, a just monarch. Had it been the English John, indeed, thy fears had been too surely grounded ; but, praise to the saints ! those days are over.'

'The King may be great,' replied the Knight, 'and he may be just with the justice of kings ; yet small defence shall my poor infant find in his greatness or his justice. What is the fate that ever awaits a tender maiden falling under the guardianship of the Crown ? To be mated with whomsoever the sovereign may regard with eyes of favour, or whom he may deem it needful to bribe to his allegiance. Can I forget the severities with which my sister Blanche was forced into the arms of the ferocious lord of Villeneuve ; and dare I hope that Philip will deign to cast a glance of compassion or interest on my child ? Fain would I have witnessed her espousals before my death ; and had purposed, indeed, contracting her without delay to the gallant Ferrand de Montmarte, but he is now far distant, and my last hour is all but come.'

'Ferrand de Montmarte,' repeated the Baron in a hesitating tone ; 'I know him to be justly held in high honour, and faithful as valiant, and yet——'

‘And yet,’ said Sir John, ‘better fitted for a father than a bridegroom to the poor innocent ; but what would you have, De Drumont ? So at least should she find a kind and powerful protector ; and for the forty years you so mislike, should I not rather choose the constant wisdom of maturer years, than the hot affections and fickle regards of youth ?’

‘Ferrand de Montmartre !’ repeated the Baron, smiling ; ‘why, he is to the full as old as I am, and doth he contract marriage with this tender nursling ? Why, he won his spurs upon that very day when thou and I received knighthood together, at the hand of the princely Cœur de Lion, before the walls of Acre.’

‘Well do I recollect the day,’ replied the Knight, with a sigh. ‘But all this avails not ; I cannot do as I would, and the little one will be left without the shielding arm of a husband for her defence. De Drumont, I would fain see her once more. It is four years since I beheld her, and now methinks it would lighten my mind. That poor child is the only one that remains of my blood or my name ; I have no other kindred.’

‘That is no hard matter,’ said the Baron, ‘if, as thou sayest, she is but a few leagues from hence. We will despatch messengers to reclaim her, and bring her hither with all speed.’

Sir John’s countenance brightened at the words, and it was agreed that an escort should be sent without delay to the nunnery he had indicated, where the child had been left in charge of her aunt, the Prioress.

CHAPTER VI.

INSTEAD of making arrangements for the purpose mentioned in the last chapter, the Baron began slowly to pace the room with bent brows and his eyes fixed on the ground, like one in deep thought ; while the wounded Knight closed his eyes in peaceful enjoyment of the rest which seemed so grateful after the fatigue and discomfort

of his long and harassing journey. All without was very still, and for several moments nothing broke the silence except the cawing of a colony of rooks in the tree-tops. At length the Baron paused abruptly in his walk, and came again to the side of the bed.

‘D’Harancourt, my old and dear friend,’ he said, ‘loth indeed am I that your last hours should be weighted with any cares, so I have sought a way to lighten you of them ; and that, should it find your sanction, which I doubt not, I trust I have devised. Know, then, that I also have an only child—a gallant and promising boy ; and though, in truth, I bear no great liking to these baby bridals, yet for your mind’s ease, and that I may gain the right to be a defender to the little maid, we shall, if you will have it so, make it a match between them. So will she find all due care and protection at the hands of one who will be to her as a father ; and yet, methinks, a blooming boy shall make a fitter bridegroom than a scarred and grizzled warrior for so tender a virgin !’

‘Truly should I rejoice,’ replied Sir John, with animation, ‘that my child should be guarded by the fidelity and valour of the noble De Drumont, even wert thou not my most loving friend, my heart’s brother !’

‘Then may the good Father join their hands before the rising of to morrow’s sun. But sayest thou, D’Harancourt, that she hath been left in the care of thy wife’s sister, now the most holy mother Angélique ? If it be so, I have cause to know that no alliance with my house will meet with favour in her eyes.’

‘Her heart is now distracted from the affairs of earth,’ said the Knight, ‘and has no place for ancient enmities.’

The Baron’s glance might have conveyed that he had less confidence in the absolute power of the cloister to divert the mind of ambition from dwelling upon worldly things, but he merely said :

‘I will send the trustiest of my retainers with a sufficient force to guard so precious a treasure from all chance of peril on the journey ; one, too, who without doubt yet dwells in thy memory. Canst thou have forgot my faithful squire, Stephen Runet ?’

'Nay, by St. Philip!' answered Sir John. 'Thy foster brother, whom my own eyes beheld bestride thee in battle, and contend with a score of pagans single-handed for possession of thy bleeding body? who, on the same day, mounted me when I was unhorsed, and gave me his own sword in lieu of my shattered weapon, hewing for himself a path through the foe with battle axe alone? I must see him again, De Drumont, for thou seest the very thought of him has power to wake these old memories!'

'And so thou shalt,' replied the Baron; 'and from thine own lips shall he learn his errand.'

'Thou wilt say I am changeful as a woman,' said the Knight after an instant's pause; 'yet now my mind misgives me somewhat of thy project. Who can discern the heart of youth? and who may prophesy the manhood of the playful child? Well I know that thy care for the orphan babe will be yet more watchful than that of the husband to whom I would have given her; but how know we if this boy bridegroom shall prove a staff on which to lean our trust?'

'My friend,' answered the Baron, 'on the first coming of spring the branches of yonder noble chestnut were clothed with the close brown buds alone; yet, for I knew the tree, I could surely foretell that luxuriant crown of green.'

'Thou sayest truly,' replied Sir John; 'yet did an untimely frost nip the tender shoots they had drooped, blackened, and withered on the bough.'

The countenance of the Baron overclouded somewhat at the hesitation thus expressed, which his friend perceiving, grasped his hand.

'Yet to search the future too closely were alike unwise and ungrateful. We can but do that which seems best in our own eyes, and leave the result to Heaven. Sayest thou that the boy is of promise?'

'Of the fairest,' replied the Baron. 'I will have him brought hither, and thine own eyes shall satisfy thy doubts. I trust, indeed, that he is of true mettle, D'Harancourt, and thou shalt find in him sparks of the knightly spirit of his house.'

The Baron now requested Father Paul, who re-entered at that moment, to satisfy himself of the condition of his patient, to send in search of Bertram ; and it was not long before he was found and conducted to the chamber. The child stood hesitating upon the threshold, regarding with a doubtful and wondering, though by no means fearful, expression, the unexpected sight of the somewhat ghastly figure reclined upon the bed. That he had come fresh from some violent exercise was apparent, from his rent and soiled dress, and shaggy disordered hair ; no less than from the unusually heightened colour, and the breath which still came quick and panting between his parted lips. He stood quiet till his father spoke to him.

‘Come hither, my child,’ he said kindly, with a feeling of something almost like compunction at the sight of the unconscious little figure, of whose destiny he had just been disposing so calmly. ‘This noble Knight will give thee a pretty playmate ; a little maid whom we shall cherish for his sake when he is here no longer. How wilt thou thank him for so fair a present ?’

Bertram stood silent, a little bewildered, and dropped his eyes before those of Sir John, who had fixed a penetrating gaze upon him from the moment of his advance. Yet his heart was beating with pleasure nevertheless, for the thought of a little girl playfellow, to share his pastimes and witness his exploits, whom he should protect and control, seemed one of great delight to him. He looked up at last, half frightened by the silence, and feeling as though a reply of some kind was expected from him ; but knowing not what to say, he went up to Sir John and very gravely kissed his hand, and then returning to his father’s side, stood looking at him from beneath his eyebrows.

‘What say you, Bertram,’ inquired the Baron, smiling ; ‘wilt thou not rejoice to welcome a little bride for thine own ?’

‘Yes,’ replied Bertram ; ‘it is what would make me more glad than anything.’

‘Thou wilt be true husband to her ?’

I will love and serve her always !’

‘Well spoken, my boy,’ said the Knight, laughing heartily at the demure air with which this reply was given. ‘Tell me now, if thou canst, what is the duty which a true knight owes to his lady?’

Bertram, in his association with his father’s squires and pages, had caught some of the gallant sentiments and phrases which distinguished the youthful chivalry of the age; and, in no way disconcerted by the mirth of Sir John, answered steadily :

‘He shall defend her in all peril, and give her love and honour before all other ladies in the world. He shall maintain her beauty and virtue against all, and shall never break faith towards her, but serve her in all honour to his life’s end.’

‘And all these things wilt thou do, my little champion?’ questioned Sir John, looking fixedly at him.

‘Yes, I will do them all,’ replied Bertram. ‘A cavalier must do all that; Philip has told me so.’

Sir John d’Harancourt permitted one hand to fall upon the head of the boy, who had gradually approached him, and toyed absently with his hair; while surveying him with a smiling yet thoughtful expression for some moments. Bertram looked up, encouraged to greater familiarity.

‘Why do you lie here so still, and look so pale?’ he asked.

‘It is because I have a deadly hurt,’ said the Knight; ‘and shall never rise from this bed again.’

‘How?’ asked Bertram rather awed, but with a thrill of interest.

‘It was but a band of robber knaves who set upon me in a wood, and would have rifled me like a shorn sheep; but they met with stouter arms and cooler heads than they counted on, and got more blows than booty. Yet they left me some ugly gashes.’

The expression of interest faded out of Bertram’s eyes, and he said in a tone of disappointment :

‘Is that all? I thought you had been in some great battle such as my father has told me of, and Hildebrand the minstrel.’

‘And dost thou love to hear such tales?’ inquired Sir John, smiling at the boy.

'Oh! yes,' he replied; 'and Hildebrand tells me so many. All of Sir Roland, and our own Duke Rollo, and King Arthur too, and of the crusades.'

'Well, my boy,' answered the Knight with a sigh, 'I, too, could tell of many a hard-fought fray, wherein I have borne meas, I trust, not without honour. Something, too, might I speak of those same crusades; but here, thou seest, I have but escaped the shock of knightly battle to meet my death at the hands of base peasant marauders.'

'But you need not lie long here,' said Bertram in tones of hopeful earnestness; 'the good Father Paul can soon heal your wounds, and you will be strong again. I will run to find him.'

'Nay!' replied Sir John, stroking his hair with a melancholy smile; 'the good Father can indeed do much, but there is one that is stronger than he, and that is Death. He has claimed me now, and never more shall I rise from this bed until they bear me to the grave. Father Paul can but aid me by his prayers and counsels, the precious weapons of his spiritual armoury, whereby he may confound, and hath already confounded, the heaviness and terrors which beset the parting hour. But what is this to thee, my child!' he continued, observing how Bertram's countenance fell, 'to call up such rueful looks? It is but a stranger whom thou hast once seen, quitting the world, sooner than he had thought it may be, yet not reluctant.'

'But it makes me very sorry,' said Bertram simply, and as Sir John looked down into the candid eyes, he saw that they were beginning to fill with tears.

'Well, then,' he said, drawing the boy towards him with a caressing action, 'if thou lovest me, and art sorry, thou wilt listen to my requests and heed them?'

'Indeed I will,' answered Bertram promptly, but wondering.

'If I should leave with thee the most precious thing I have, wouldst thou guard it ever from all harm, for my sake? The little bride that I shall give thee is such a precious treasure; wilt thou take her for thy lady, and serve her faithfully for ever, according as thou sayest?'

'Yes,' said Bertram ; ' I have said it before.'

' Ah, boy,' replied Sir John, smiling rather sadly ; ' vows are lightly made, but the fulfilment is harder. Tell me now by what achievements thou mayest pretend to so high an honour. Let me know of thy prowess. What canst thou do ?'

Bertram was very willing to relate stories of his skill and daring, and soon warmed to excitement in their recital ; ending with a triumphant declaration that he could shoot his arrow into the top of an oak tree which stood at a little distance, and bring down a bunch of acorns from it.

' Tush, boy !' exclaimed Sir John with affected incredulity. ' I believe thee not. Thou wouldst fool me as the Gascons do—by boasting with the tongue of what the hand never executed.'

' I am no Gascon, Sir Knight,' retorted Bertram with a sudden sharpness that was almost startling ; ' would you tell me that I am a liar ?'

' My son !' interposed the smiling father, who had hitherto listened in silence, ' this cavalier is my guest, and he lies upon a bed of mortal sickness.'

Bertram glanced shyly at Sir John, and his eyes again softened.

' Pardon,' he said, ' but indeed I made no boast. I wish that I might show you what I said was truth ; for it is only fit for cowards to talk of what they cannot do.'

' Go, then,' said the Knight, ' into the court below, and let me know what thou canst do. And take good heed to play the man, my little paladin, for if thou gainest a fair lady, she shall be the prize of thy skill and thy valour, I promise thee.'

Bertram very readily ran down to the courtyard beneath the window, where he gave such exhibitions of his strength and spirit as served amply to satisfy his amused and partial judges.

' What sayest thou, D'Harancourt ?' said the Baron, turning his eyes again towards the bed. ' Is not the boy a fair shoot from the old stem of De Drumont ? Thou

seest he can strike hard, shoot straight, and ride fairly. Ay and bear himself gently too, and front thee boldly.'

'It is enough, my friend,' replied Sir John, speaking again in a tone of painful exhaustion; 'thou art blest with a noble heir, and a gallant shoot, as thou sayest, from the old stem. Let us now make no more delay in what we have to do before my death, for I feel the pain and feebleness seize upon me again, and my time will not be long. Let the good Stephen come to receive his charge from me straight, and may heaven speed his journey that he return not too late.'

The change which a few moments had wrought in the condition of the sick man was, indeed, very great. The cheerfulness of his mood, and the serenity of his eye, combined with the full and natural tones of his voice, during the period of temporary ease which had come to him with the early morning, had made it seem impossible to his friend that the end could be so near; and the Baron had never to that moment wholly abandoned hope. But now the ashy paleness, the distressful knitting of the brows, and breath drawn short and fast with pain, formed a pitiful contrast, and the Baron hastily summoned Father Paul to his relief; at the same time sending for Stephen to allay the anxiety of his mind. While the good father was yet busied by the couch of his patient, Bertram ran in with a face full of eagerness, and, going at once to the bedside, demanded:

'Have I done well? Am I fit for her?'

'Yes, my child,' replied Sir John languidly, unable longer to smile or jest with him.

'And no Gascon?' persisted the boy, trying to approach him nearer.

Sir John made a mute sign of dissent, and the Baron stepped forward to lead his son from the room. But even now the sick man seemed to desire the child's presence, and, much to the surprise of his friend, protested.

'Nay,' he said, 'let him remain. De Drumont, you shall not part me from my little paladin; his presence cannot add to my suffering.'

'Only remember,' said the Father, laying a gentle hand

on Bertram's arm, 'that soft footsteps and low voices are fitting for the sick-chamber.'

Bertram, with the sorrowful look again clouding his eyes, nestled down on the floor by the bedside, and sat there so still for a long time, that it was only by looking towards him that Sir John could be aware of his vicinity. His eyes often glanced that way, for the boy had in their one interview strangely attached himself to the dying man. It might have been that the approach of death had so softened his heart that he could perceive a charm in the simplicity of childhood unfelt before; however it was, the presence of Bertram appeared to have a soothing and quieting influence on him.

It was not long before Stephen appeared to receive his charge, his towering figure bending silently over the bed, and an expression of genuine regret softening his rugged features; but Sir John had no such inspiriting talk as he had anticipated with this old acquaintance, and could only press his hand feebly, saying, as he drew his signet from his finger and gave it to his messenger:

'This, for the most holy mother Angélique, Prioress at the Convent of St. Agnes, and my dear sister. Say to her that these are the last words of her brother, now on his passage to the grave. I pray her to send me by thy hands my little daughter Claudine, whom I left in her care, for my end is very near, and I would see her before I die. Moreover, that end will be the more peaceful in that I shall contract for her a happy and honourable alliance before I am withdrawn from the world. Bid my holy sister pray for my departing soul, and now haste my good friend to do thine errand, and fail not to bring me the child; for I feel that I cannot close my eyes in tranquillity, till they have beheld her; and delay upon the journey may make return too late. Go, and bear my most loving greetings to my sister.'

Stephen, who had been bending low to catch the words, now bowed in silence and withdrew from the apartment. Half an hour later, the sound of retreating horse-hoofs acquainted them that he had started upon his errand; and then followed many hours of silent watching, with

many fluctuations between hope and fear, lest Death should descend upon the sick-chamber before the mission was accomplished.

CHAPTER VII.

STEPHEN, his mind wholly mastered by the knowledge of the necessity for speed, anxiously hurried his preparations for departure, and ground his teeth with impatience at the slight delay occasioned by a litter, which, by the Baron's directions, was made ready to receive the child; and the tardiness of the old nurse who was to occupy it. He had as his companions half a score and more of well-armed men; most of whom were followers of Sir John d'Harancourt, and all eager to gratify the last wishes of their dying master. Great, indeed, as Stephen's impatience might be, it was yet exceeded by theirs; for it was known among them that Sir John held his life on so precarious a tenure, as to give good ground for the fear that it might have flickered out before their return was possible. One youth among them in particular, a favourite page of the Knight's, whose ardent activity had outstripped all the others in the rapidity of his movements, stood chafing for the start, and scowling upon his more backward companions until all were mounted; when he found that the woman was yet to be waited for, and his dissatisfaction found open vent.

'How long are we to loiter here,' he cried to Stephen, 'hanging upon a woman's pleasure, and my master pining upon his death-bed for the sight of his child? If she will not come, we were best ride off and do our errand. I doubt not that we shall be sufficient to escort the little lady to her father, without the help of an old woman.'

'And bring her in fainting with heat and fatigue, and terrified well-nigh to death by our grim faces and rough handling,' returned Stephen, in a tone of sardonic contempt. 'If you would be ruled by me, Master Eustace, you would possess yourself in patience, and leave fretting

and tiring your horse ; for there is a rapid ride beneath a sultry sun before us.'

The youth, with a sigh, discontinued his restless jerking of the reins, and remained silent ; but he was not to be tried much longer, for in another moment all delay was brought to an end by the appearance of the person who had occasioned it : an anxious, comfortable old dame, a little apt to be discomposed when any sudden call was made on her activity ; and wearing an air of great importance in respect to the unexpected and novel service now required of her. Stephen gave the word for departure with a promptitude which showed that he also was anxious to be upon the road. Even when fairly started, however, their pace was not rapid enough to satisfy the young page before mentioned, for the incumbrance of the litter compelled them to journey at very moderate speed.

Stephen, aware that his horses could not bear to be too hard pressed beneath that scorching sun, if they were to accomplish all the work which lay before them, pursued his course steadily, without regarding the impatient glances of his young companion. No one of the party had much attention to spare for the landscape which extended itself on either side ; and yet it was well worth noting, though the protracted heat of the weather had robbed it of that charm of luxuriant verdure, which more properly belongs to an earlier season of the year, and the earth seemed parched and gaping for rain. The sultry oppression of the day, however, and the arid character of the soil, were less felt during the earlier part of their journey, which led them for some time down a thickly-wooded incline, which was traversed without distress to either men or horses. But when they afterwards emerged into open country, and began to ascend a succession of steep hills, completely bare, but for the numerous flocks of sheep, which were endeavouring to crop a scanty meal from the brown and stunted grass, no one would have wished their pace accelerated. But they held steadily on, though the uphill way continued for some distance, and, upon mounting the last brow, were delighted to see before them a swiftly running river, which gave promise of refresh-

ment. Arrived at its brink, the horses drank of it eagerly in copious draughts, and Stephen smiled with a little contempt to see two or three of his younger companions dismount for the same refreshment; while he himself sat immovable, as though impervious to the influences of thirst, heat, or fatigue.

Very pleasant was the dash through the cooling waters as they again rode on; but when the further bank of the river was gained, a harder path lay before them. They had now to cross a wild and desolate tract of land, without shelter from tree or shrub, where the soil beneath their feet was broken and irregular, and so encumbered with tangled briars and a rank growth of vegetation, as seriously to impede the progress of the horses. This labour, continued for miles, began at last to produce a noticeable effect upon them; and they stumbled wearily over the uneven ground with evident signs of exhaustion. Some of the men, too, began to flag a little in their energy; and, eager as they had formerly been to press forward, seemed now disposed to loiter. Stephen, however, succeeded in maintaining a rate of progress, steady if not rapid; for he well knew that he was riding a race with time; and should the return be an hour too late, his errand would be fruitless. But when at last, to their great relief, they emerged from this desert country into more cultivated regions, with the welcome shade of trees, he found himself obliged to halt for half an hour, that both horses and riders might enjoy a short period of rest and refreshment.

It was then not long past noon, and, beneath the benignant shade of a grove of chestnuts, where the little troop were drawn up, the poor horses, relieved of their burdens, cropped the coarse herbage with a keen sense of enjoyment; while their riders, lying for the most part at full length upon the ground, did equal justice to the frugal provision of dried fish and coarse bread, accompanied by a flask of wine of at least tolerable quality. The men's spirits rose, and a tide of talk and jest flowed in; even those followers of Sir John d'Harancourt, who had watched with the deepest anxiety his gradual decline,

appearing to cast the weight of care from their minds in that hour of rest and relaxation.

'Master Eustace, you cannot choose but drink with me,' said Stephen, refilling the cup he had just drained, and handing it to the page; 'for here we have no choice of tankards.'

'As often as you will,' replied the youth, readily tossing off the draught; 'so that the wine be no worse. Your Baron keeps a better cellar than some of higher name, and greater state, that I have known. When I was in England with my father I followed him to court, and not soon nor easily shall I forget our entertainment. The wine was sour as verjuice; but that was not the worst, for it was so clogged with worms and other uncleanness, that the sight was more than satisfied before our lips were wet. Yet this was brought for our drinking, and that of many another gentleman.'

'And they drank the vile potion?' demanded Stephen.

'We drank not deep indeed,' answered Eustace; 'yet some drops did we pour through our closed teeth. Faugh!'

'I would have dashed the flagons to the ground,' exclaimed Stephen. 'Shame upon the prince whose hospitality can furnish no better entertainment to his faithful vassals!'

'Well,' replied the young page, with a smile; 'let us drink and make merry with our better fortune; and the more as we are to-day a bridal party.'

'How?' cried two or three of his companions, who had heard nothing in the hurry of departure of the ulterior object of their journey.

'What!' said Eustace; 'knew you not that my lord De Drumont will wed his son to my little lady there?' and he signed towards the west with a wave of his hand.

The others proceeded to ask sundry questions, to which none but rather meagre replies were forthcoming; and meantime the old nurse Margery, who had been rocking to and fro under a tree a little apart, and lamenting over her shaken bones, sat staring upon them with round eyes of wonder:

‘What!’ she at length ejaculated; ‘here are two babes but just out of their nurses’ arms, and my lord would marry them; and this is the affair of a moment, too! It is impossible—it cannot be!’

‘It *is*, however,’ replied Stephen; ‘and though I answer not for the lady, yet this can I vouch for her bridegroom, that he has long since stood upon his own feet, and learned to discard the nurse’s lap.’

‘It is impossible!’ persisted the old woman. ‘It cannot be that the heir of De Drumont should be wedded thus, with less ceremony than a shepherd and a sunburnt peasant lass would use to mark the day. No festival prepared—no guests bidden! Oh, me! how often have I pictured the day of our young lord’s bridal, when we should see again the same gallant show as when his father brought home my own gracious lady, rest her soul. A sweet lady she was, and fair to look upon that day, and how proud he rode beside her! But now these poor infants, to be dragged through their hasty marriage-day ere yet they can know its delight.’

‘Why, good mother,’ broke in the young page, laughing at her dismay, ‘did you never yet hear of a baby-marriage? And for festal cheer,’ he added sorrowfully, ‘we look not for it while our master lies there dying.’

‘And as we will not forget him dying,’ said Stephen, rising with alacrity, ‘we will mount again, for our horses are rested enough to bear us on. We have cleared the worst part of our way, but no more moments must be spent here.’

In a very short time the whole party were on horseback again, and rode on with renewed vigour over easier ground than that which had fallen to their lot in the morning. Trees shaded their path at intervals for the greater part of the way, and, in place of the desert loneliness which had formerly surrounded them, they now occasionally passed by the dwellings of men; and could hear the tolling of some convent bell, the mingled din of the castle court, or at least passed some cluster of peasants’ huts, whence came the lowing of the cows, and the bay of the sheep-dogs.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT last the sturdy squire arrived before the convent, which was situated just on the outskirts of a town of some size ; and here Stephen drew up his party, whom he directed to wait without ; and then, dismounting himself, and calling to the nurse to accompany him, began to knock loudly upon the ponderous gates for admission. His summons was answered without any great delay ; but the old crone who played the part of portress kept the gates as nearly closed as possible while she parleyed with the somewhat formidable looking visitor, and surveyed him with curious eyes.

‘Good Sister,’ said Stephen briefly, ‘say to the lady Prioress, that a messenger from her brother, Sir John d’Harancourt, would speak with her.’

‘The holy mother is now at vespers,’ replied the woman, ‘and I dare not disturb her for worldly things ; but after, I will let her know your errand. Meantime, you may, if you will, remain here in the outer court.’

‘Woman,’ began Stephen in a tone of some sternness, ‘the hand of death will wait for neither prayers nor masses.’ But she had gone without listening to him, and he was left pacing up and down, for not many moments, indeed, but long enough to kindle his impatience. Such arms as he bore he had left without, in consideration of the sacred character of the precincts ; and when the portress again appeared, signing to him to follow her, he obeyed with great alacrity, till he was presently ushered into the parlour where strangers were received.

Here there was no further delay, for the Prioress stood prepared to receive her brother’s envoy, with a slight additional air of haughtiness in her lofty carriage. Her black robes enveloped a figure which, though small and spare, yet bore an air of command which was augmented by her proud and piercing black eyes, which looked far better fitted to convey an expression of scorn and defiance, than of that meek and saint-like gentleness which was supposed to become her profession.

It has been said that the eye is the window of the soul, through which the secret passions and desires of the heart will find an involuntary outlet ; and certainly, if it had been the wish of the holy mother Angélique to present the aspect of the recluse swayed by no other inclinations than those of humble piety and devotional purity, those eyes must have defeated her purpose with all keen observers, and told a tale of yet unchecked passions and ambitious designs. Even Stephen, though he was not in general very easily subdued by any display of manner, felt a little awed on entering her presence ; and feeling himself slightly at a loss for words in which to address this *grand dame* of the convent, he merely bent on one knee before her, and presented in silence the ring which was the token of Sir John d'Harancourt. A careless movement of her hand directed him to rise.

'Thou art the messenger,' she said, 'so it has been reported to me, and so this signet attests, of my brother, Sir John d'Harancourt, but lately—as I may presume—returned from warfare in distant lands ; art thou one of his household ?'

'No, madam,' replied Stephen ; 'but of that of his nearest friend, the Baron de Drumont.'

Her eyes kindled with a sudden flash at the mention of that name ; but it was in tones of yet more cold and measured distance that she said :

'Proceed to unfold thy charge, for I learn that it is urgent.'

'Madam,' replied Stephen, 'I am no bearer of good tidings, but it is no fault in the messenger that he must burden the heart of another, by delivering that which lies heavy on his own. The noble Sir John d'Harancourt, while journeying homeward after his long absence, fell in with a band of malefactors, whereby he received wounds so grievous that he now lies dying at the castle of my lord ; and now by my mouth conveys to you his last desires.'

The lady had started and changed countenance somewhat upon hearing of the dangerous condition of a relative, whom she had always pictured to herself as in

the prime of vigour, but said nothing ; and when Stephen paused to give her an opportunity of putting any questions which she might desire, she merely waved her hand with a slightly impatient gesture for him to continue.

Stephen then delivered the remainder of the message with which Sir John had charged him, with the scrupulous exactness of one whose chief care had long been bestowed on the fulfilment of the behests of others.

The Prioress stood silent for a moment when all was said, as though in thought or hesitation ; then raised her head and spoke :

‘It grieves me much,’ she said, in a tone of more gentleness than she had yet used, ‘to hear of my poor brother’s distressful plight. Bear to him the loving farewells of a sister who may never behold him more till this world shall pass away ; and say that the prayers of my convent shall ascend both night and day for the repose of his soul.’

‘The child, madam,’ Stephen ventured to suggest, as she seemed to have no intention of adding to her words. ‘I am in haste to return with her to comfort him.’

‘Doth he so hunger for a sight of the babe,’ said the Prioress, ‘that he would have me send her at so late an hour, to ride over many leagues of wild and solitary way in the care of none but rugged men ? Bear back my message that I dare not thus expose her, though much it grieves me to cross my brother’s wish.’

‘For the hour, madam,’ replied Stephen bluntly, ‘in the heats of August it is better riding at midnight, than at noonday, to my poor judgment. For the length and hardships of the way, my lord has sent a litter in which the little lady may rest at ease ; and force enough to guard her from harm. And as to careful hands wherein to deliver her, I have here this worthy nurse,’ and he drew Margery more forward, ‘so that I trust to bring the child to her father, if it be your pleasure to yield her to me, without fright, hurt, or hindrance.’

‘If thou art indeed a nurse, good woman,’ said the lady, directing a glance towards Margery, who covered her perturbation by a deep reverence, ‘thou canst say how

far it is fitting that a feeble child of so tender age, and that child now upon a bed of sickness, should be carried so far through the deadly night air, to receive the last kiss of a father, who may have passed away before she can reach his arms.'

Before the nurse could collect her scattered senses sufficiently to reply, Stephen, who began to see that he would have some difficulties to contend with, and was resolved that no womanly over-caution in regard to the child's health should stand in his way, broke in with some impatience :

'Her life will scarce be risked, madam, by one night journey. Were the need for haste less pressing, I would not use urgency, but I have already laid before you the grave and weighty reasons which forbid delay. If we ride hard all the night we may yet find ourselves too slow, for we are racing with Death : and he is fleetier than the best courser ever foaled. The noble Knight would fain quit this world in the happy knowledge that his daughter is under the protection of his true and staunch friend, rather than she should be left the sport of fortune ; but if his breath have passed before our return, it will be too late for these espousals.'

A momentary flash either of triumph or of anger again shot from her eyes ; but it was in tones of perfect calmness that the lady replied :

'My brother would scarce desire to peril his child's life on this rough journey. I, in whose care she is, dare not at least have her so borne from her sick-bed, for very sick she lies, and in like case to die, I fear me, unless by our prayers a merciful Heaven may be moved to avert the blow.'

Stephen remained for a moment in silence ; he was a little startled, but not quelled by this rebuff. He was not a man who regarded the sacred order with so deep a reverence as to blind his natural sagacity, and felt a little doubtful whether this Prioress was dealing frankly by him. The account of the child's illness seemed to him rather in the nature of an after-thought, and its serious nature might have been exaggerated. The lady's glances,

too, had somewhat puzzled him. At length he raised his eyes to meet those fastened upon him with a gaze of inquiry, which had something almost of mockery in it, and said :

‘Sir John d’Harancourt would preserve the life of his daughter from harm before all else ; nor would he have it risked to bring comfort to his last hour, yet I have one grace to ask : Let me see with mine own eyes in what state she is ; that if I must return from a fruitless errand, I may carry him a true report thereof.’

‘Vassal,’ replied the Prioress, drawing herself up with the haughtiness of offended dignity, ‘when didst thou ever learn that it is seemly to admit such as thee into the interior of our convent walls, to visit a sick-chamber ? Forget not thyself, and this holy place, so far.’

‘Your pardon, madam,’ said Stephen, ‘but if to venture further within these sacred precincts be too great sacrilege, the child might perhaps be borne to us here without great danger in so warm an air. If I must return without my charge, I would fain be enabled to testify of my own knowledge that it is with good cause. Without this my lord will scarce be satisfied.’

The Prioress protested against this rather bold proposal, but Stephen insisted so strongly on his request, that she at last consented to comply with it, as the readiest means of despatching a visitor of whom she was becoming heartily anxious to be rid. Having summoned an attendant, to whom she communicated some orders in a low tone, she awaited in silence the return of her messenger, which was not long delayed. The child who was presently carried into the apartment was evidently in the grasp of some deadly disease ; and yet, though pallid and emaciated, her frame was rather over, than under, the usual size of children at her age. Very beautiful her countenance must have been in health, but now that the brightness of colouring and expression had left it, it could no longer be called so. She had been hastily wrapped in a coverlid, and laid with great tenderness in the sister’s arms, with her long tresses of black hair hanging in tangled profusion ; and her large black eyes, which looked very dark

and mournful indeed set in that little pale face, gazing in languid wonder at the new scene around her. Stephen looked long and fixedly at her, and then turned gravely towards the Prioress.

‘I thank you, madam,’ he said in a tone of some irony, ‘for the grace you have shown me in thus permitting me to see the daughter of the Count Gérard Duferny, but I would pray also for the same favour in respect to the daughter of Sir John d’Harancourt.’

The Prioress was in consternation at so immediate a discovery of the deception she had sought to practise on her brother’s messenger, and stood silent in mingled alarm and mortification.

‘Do not trifle, madam,’ pursued the old squire, with perhaps a little less respect of manner than he had formerly observed; ‘but let me do my errand and begone. Bethink you that your brother lies in anxiety upon his dying bed!’

Greatly surprised that what she had regarded as a perfectly safe stratagem was frustrated by Stephen’s accidental acquaintance with the person of the child presented to him, the Prioress was no less vexed that an inmate of the convent had been a witness to her discomfiture; for if she sometimes chose to tread in crooked paths, she had no desire that her subordinate should find her straying there.

A little sharply she now directed the sister to withdraw; an order which the young nun, who had been gazing with wide, astonished eyes at a scene which seemed to promise more of interest, than the usual dull routine of convent life afforded, obeyed with a little apparent reluctance.

‘It may suffice for the Baron de Drumont,’ said the lady, turning towards Stephen with all her former dignity of bearing, ‘for I see that this message, purporting to come from the mouth of another, owes its origin in truth to him, that I refuse to place my niece in the hands of any of his emissaries; nor shall any action of mine be consenting to the schemes which his interest and ambition have framed for her disposal; whether they have or have not the too readily won sanction of an enfeebled and dying man, over-much swayed by memories of ancient

friendship. Let this suffice for the Baron, and it may well suffice for thee. Go therefore, for the sun is sinking fast, and it is time our gates were closed upon the outer world.'

There was no sentiment of awe remaining to prevent Stephen's eye from meeting firmly the imperious glance which confronted him, as he answered with prompt decision:

'I go, madam, when the child has been delivered to me, but not before. It is not my wont to return to my lord with his behests unaccomplished.'

The Prioress, accustomed to implicit deference from those about her, was still more astonished than angered at the unusual tone of this importunate messenger, with whom she scarcely knew how to deal.

'Remember,' she said haughtily; 'the reverence due to me in virtue of my holy state and high office in this convent; it has already been forgotten too long. These give my sacred title to obedience, and I now command you to withdraw, if you have yet any reverence for sacred things.'

Stephen was a man who had so little of the spiritual element in his nature, that he was much less affected than many men of his time, by the religious system in the midst of which he had been reared. He had too little imagination for much superstition, and regarded the priestly orders with something less than that awful veneration they were accustomed to inspire. And yet he would have defended his religion at the cost of his life, and never lightly omitted any prescribed observances of it; performing these obligations in much the same spirit as that in which he served and followed his master; except that his sentiment towards the Baron was far more fervid and deep in its devotion, than that with which he regarded the church. Perhaps too the Mother Angélique inspired him with the less reverence that she was a woman; and he cherished at the bottom of his heart a little of that contempt for the weaker sex, which may possibly have underlain much of the adulation and extravagant devotion which was paid to them.

Moreover, anything in the nature of duplicity was so

alien to his mind, that no one who practised it, whether priest or layman, noble or serf, could retain high consideration in his sight. It was therefore in no more dread of spiritual terrors, than he would have felt in any occasion which tried his corporeal courage, that he answered :

‘For all things sacred, madam, I trust I have that honour which becomes a Christian man ; but I am here in the discharge of a binding duty laid upon me by my lord. If in the fulfilment of it, I should be, which Heaven forbid, betrayed into any act which might savour of irreverence towards this holy sisterhood, I can but make confession thereof at fitting time and place : but for this time your commands fall upon heedless ears ; for from this spot I stir not, until the daughter of Sir John d’Harancourt has been placed in my hands.’

The Prioress gazed with astonishment at this bold disputer of her authority, and her eyes fell before his. There was in the look he cast upon her an immovable firmness, an honest scorn, which almost abashed her. It was long since she had been accustomed to undisguised truth, even when conveyed in the silent language of an expressive glance ; and she began to feel a little womanly fear of this man, whom she could not subdue ; for her mind, though scheming and ambitious, often lacked force to carry out the projects which her ready wit conceived. She would have done and risked much to prevent the union of her niece, for whom she had cherished other views, with the family of the Baron, against whom she conceived herself to have more than one ancient ground of enmity ; but she was not willing that her intrigues to prevent it should come under the observation of her household of demure nuns, before whom it was fitting that she should display a superior sanctity and unworldliness.

As the Prioress in her hesitation regarded Stephen with anxious eyes, he stood before her as upright as a forest oak ; and to all appearance no more easily to be shaken. With her establishment composed of women alone, it was impossible to compel his departure if he persisted in his determination to remain ; and the lateness of the hour

rendered it necessary that he should leave the convent before much more time were allowed to pass, if she would avoid grave scandal to the pious community of which she was at the head. For many moments she wavered ; pride and passion struggling against prudence and necessity ; till at length she determined upon the safer course of yielding, cherishing meantime the hope that Stephen had already been sufficiently delayed to prevent his return before the decease of her brother ; and she accordingly ordered the child to be brought into the apartment.

If Stephen had felt any suspicious doubts as to the identity of the child now presented to him, they would have been speedily dispelled by the close resemblance to Sir John which could be traced in even her infant features ; especially by one who could recall the Knight in his younger days, before he had been prematurely aged by toil and suffering. The little maiden who now appeared holding tightly to the hand of her conductress, though subdued into bashful timidity by the awe-inspiring presence of the Prioress, yet gave evidence of health and vigour, in her free and active movements, as well as the rounded lines of her graceful little figure, and the rather roguish sparkle of her brown eyes ; though her complexion was indeed deficient in colour, owing perhaps to the confined routine of convent life. The little chin, which projected somewhat disproportionately beneath the ruddy lips, gave a certain character of oddity to her face, while imparting to it a greater degree of character than is usually seen in a child so young ; and the close confinement of her hair, together with her prim old-world garb, gave an added touch to the quaint appearance of the little creature.

The lady, who had maintained a haughty silence during the moments of waiting, did not break it now, but after embracing her niece with much show of affection, suffered her to be delivered into the care of Stephen ; whose few words of respectful leave-taking she received with an air of frigid indifference, and then hurried from the parlour to give free vent to the feelings of mortified pride and

anger which possessed her. Stephen with deep satisfaction caught up the child, and with his frightened and crying burden, strode after the conductress, who led him again to the outer gate; followed passively by the old nurse, whose bewilderment and terror seemed to have long since deprived her of all power of speech or voluntary action. It was not until the convent gates were securely fastened on them, and she stood again near the impatient group, which had so long waited without, that she began to give utterance to these sentiments in incoherent ejaculations, which were checked by Stephen's abruptly placing his charge in her arms; bidding her regain her place in the litter with all speed, and quiet the child if she could. Then hastily mounting himself, he ordered his party to turn homewards, only replying to the questions showered upon him as to the cause of his delay:

'Press forward now, in Heaven's name! Is this a time for talk and question? There has been too much time lost already.'

CHAPTER IX.

THE evening was already so far advanced, that Stephen soon perceived it would be impossible to cross, before the darkness, that wild tract of moorland, which had proved so trying a road in the morning, and might now by night be yet more toilsome and difficult. He used the utmost speed that was possible to traverse the distance between, but with all his efforts they only gained its margin just as the last streak of twilight was fading from the sky. There was not the faintest glimmer of moonlight to guide their footsteps; only the stars shed their feeble rays through the thick darkness that surrounded them. As though by common consent, the horsemen came to a momentary halt at this point, and strained their eyes into the obscurity, as though they expected to find some beacon to guide them in the midst of that barren plain.

'Ride on!' cried Stephen cheerily; 'keep close, ride

warily, and follow me ! My good horse shall show us our way, for he knows every inch of ground within fifteen leagues of the castle. My head upon it, he will lead us safe across !

He accordingly set forward, and contrived to maintain a steady, though by no means rapid, pace ; while every man kept his senses on the alert, to guard against the dangers, both of a sudden stumble on the uneven ground, and of a possible attack from some midnight enemies, who might be lurking in that desolate place. They were now in a great measure relieved from that excessive heat, which had so oppressed them in the morning at this point of their journey ; yet it was a dreary progress, in which the slow advance seemed to mock the impatient temper of their minds. No sounds broke the stillness of the black night but Stephen's voice, occasionally raised in a call of encouragement or guidance to the others ; or the crying of the frightened child, who, thus suddenly taken from all familiar scenes and faces, and carried away by strangers through the darkness she knew not whither, could not be soothed by all Margery's efforts ; and wailed at intervals for the good sisters, and her own little bed in the convent-home. More than one horse fell on his knees before the waste was crossed, but they arrived at its boundary at last without any serious mishap ; and heartily did both men and horses rejoice in the less rugged path that now lay before them. Stephen had not been deceived in the sagacity of his horse, for the intelligent animal had brought them to the precise point which they would have chosen to reach ; and now a down-hill ride was all that lay before them before arriving at the castle. This was accomplished with comparative ease and much greater rapidity, though the horses were by this time much tired ; and it was a very wearied party which at length reached the castle gates.

'Doth thy master yet live ?' demanded Stephen of one of Sir John's attendants who met them in the court, thus putting into words the mastering anxiety of all.

'He lives,' was the reply, 'though the term of life is not now to be counted by hours, but minutes.'

Stephen sprang from his horse, hurried the nurse with her charge from the litter, and advanced as quickly as possible towards the interior of the building. He was soon met by the Baron, who cried joyfully :

‘Thanks, my good Stephen ; we shall yet be in time !’ and taking the little girl from Margery, he carried her into the chamber of the dying man, and set her down beside her father’s bed.

Partly in broken words, partly by pleading gestures, Sir John begged for one of the dimly-burning candles that half-lighted the room to be brought close to him, that he might discern the features of the child. The poor little thing looked the image of forlorn helplessness, as she stood gazing in terrified wonder at the wasted and unearthly-looking countenance of her father ; but when he laid his hand upon her and would have caressed her, her childish courage failed altogether ; and she began to cry piteously, with fright, bewilderment, and misery. Sir John was afflicted by the sounds ; and Father Paul, seeing the distress in his patient’s face, led her a little aside, and, taking her upon his knee, strove by all the means in his power to quiet and console her.

It was now long past midnight, but Bertram had already been awakened, in readiness for the ceremony in which he had to bear so important a part ; and he now stole to the Father’s side, and laid his cheek against Claudine’s, trying to win her from her grief by encouraging whispers, and promises of protection and kindness.

Bertram’s bright young face and boyish sympathy seemed to attract her ; her sobs became less violent, and she began to direct shy glances towards him, ending by placing her tiny hand in his confidingly. They told her that it was her father lying sick upon that bed, and that he would be grieved if she would not kiss him ; and, though the name of father had no meaning for her, their efforts at consolation were so far successful that she submitted to be led back to the bedside, and stood there quietly, still tightly clasping Bertram’s hand—even enduring Sir John’s caresses without much shrinking.

When the father had at last satisfied himself with the sight of the child he might almost be said never to have known, and lay tranquil but exhausted on his pillows, Father Paul commenced the service which was to bind the two innocent children in so strong a union. The light was so arranged as to illuminate the features of the Knight, as, with one hand laid upon his burning forehead, he strove to fix his attention strongly upon the words which fell from the priest; and it shone full upon the faces of the children. On the other hand, the tall stalwart figure of the Father, which seemed as though it would better have become the warlike than the priestly calling, was but dimly revealed; while those of the Baron and two or three attendants who stood behind were cast in deep shadow, and the other parts of the room were almost in darkness.

Bertram looked flushed and eager; but the countenance of the little bride was only puzzled, and she went through her part with submissive indifference; the only expression of interest being awakened when the glittering ring was placed on her finger.

‘Is it mine?’ she asked aloud, looking down at it with a gleam of pleasure, and then glancing up at Bertram for an answer.

‘Hush!’ he said softly, rather scandalized at the interruption; for the solemn nature of the ceremony had been carefully impressed upon him.

The priest and the Baron both smiled unobserved, and the service soon came to a conclusion. Sir John—some remnants of his strength returning to him with the nearer approach of death—tenderly embraced both children; and then, placing Claudine’s hand in that of Bertram, he held them clasped, and said in tones of more energy than he had used for many hours:

‘My boy, pay good heed to my words, and hold them fast in thy heart through all the years to come. I have this night placed my only child in thy hands; and as thou servest her with true devotion, so may the blessings of a dying man fall upon thy head. Do thou be ever faithful to her, and may Heaven prosper thy steps and illume

thy days with honour. But if thou art false to this trust——

Here voice failed him, he quitted his grasp of the children's hands, and sank again into silence.

The children were now taken from the chamber ; Bertram, at least, greatly awed and impressed by the scene through which he had just passed ; and little Claudine was at last laid to rest in a comfortable cot, where, after a short interval of restlessness, and crying for the familiar faces and kind hands that she must miss for many days to come, the overtired child found forgetfulness of all her griefs in a long and deep slumber.

Meantime the strength and life of her father was rapidly and surely ebbing away. His last effort at speech seemed to have exhausted his powers, and he lay motionless, taking no apparent notice of those around him ; but wearing an expression of peaceful calm, which showed that his mind yet retained consciousness. At last an expression of acute suffering passed over his features ; he attempted to rise with a sudden movement, as though confronted by some invisible enemy, and then sank back lifeless on his pillow with a cry of 'Raymond,' which brought the Baron hastily closer to his side. It was just as the sun rose above the horizon, that the spirit fled from the body of Sir John d'Harancourt. The Baron closed his eyes, and, taking one of his hands, stood for some moments looking silently down at the lifeless form of his friend, with an expression full of melancholy ; but without indulging in any violent demonstrations of grief, which he would have considered in themselves unmanly, as well as out of place, in the face of an event he had been so well prepared to expect.

CHAPTER X.

THE deep regret which filled the minds of Sir John's attendants, for the death of a master who had inspired their affection by the peculiar benignity of his bearing, no

less than their respect by his qualities of valour and prudence, was rendered so much the more poignant that he had left behind him no sons or other kindred who might fill his place ; that he died the last of his family but for one young child, and that a female. Indeed, so completely had death, absence, and estrangement broken the circle of his early friends, that, with the exception of the Baron de Drumont, there was no one left to direct his obsequies ; and he who had so ardently longed to die at home, must be followed to the grave by his vassals and attendants alone.

It was determined to convey the body of Sir John to his own ancestral burial place ; and his little band of followers prepared immediately for departure upon their slow and melancholy journey, of little less than thirty miles, in which the Baron was to accompany them.

Previous to their departure, he would have had the little orphan brought into the chamber of death, for the last look at her father's face ; but was dissuaded by Father Paul.

‘Is it not meet,’ he said, ‘that one so tender should be brought acquainted with the awful visage of death. Let her childish memory hold the image of her father with the light of life yet shining in his eyes ; and hand and lips still warm with paternal love.’

The Baron yielded ; but, anxious to omit nothing which could assist in strongly impressing the events of the day before upon the mind of his son, he insisted that Bertram, at least, should pay this visit to the dead.

‘Thou wilt not be afraid,’ he said to the boy, taking him encouragingly by the hand, ‘to gaze upon that countenance in death which smiled upon thee kindly in life. Thou wilt come to see that noble Knight for the last time.’

Bertram, a little shrinkingly, looked up at his father as though to draw courage from his eyes, and then answered bravely :

‘I will not be afraid, I will come.’

He stood quietly looking at the lifeless form, until they led him away ; and then went passively, still without a

word, but with an expression of awe, not unmixed with terror; for the stamp of pain which had been set upon the features of the dying man had not entirely vanished. How different was that visit from those he had paid to the same room only yesterday, when he had been received with smiles and kind words; or, at least, welcoming glances, where it was now all so cold and gloomy.

Claudine awoke still fretful, and begging to be taken back to 'Sister Rachel,' upon whom she seemed to have bestowed the greater part of her affections; for it was always the name she coupled with her babbling of her old home. They tried to tell her that she was an orphan, but she could not well be brought to understand what they wished; and shocked Bertram by answering when she was told that the sick cavalier, her father, who had caressed her so much the night before, had gone away, and she would never see him again:

'I do not want to see him again. He frightens me, and I am glad he is gone away.'

Bertram took her to a place whence they could watch the funeral train set out; and the sight seemed to interest and amuse her so much that she began to laugh and chatter for the first time.

Bertram looked on the sight with very different eyes; and could not understand how she could be pleased with it.

'Remember, dear child,' said Father Paul, who had joined the children and read Bertram's puzzled expression of half displeasure, 'that the little bride is younger than you, and had never known her father. Poor little one, she shed so many tears last night, you would not wish to see her weep again? Rather try to make her smile through the whole day by seeking kindly to amuse her.'

Bertram obediently strove to follow this advice, but it was not easy; for Claudine still from time to time would begin to cry afresh for 'Sister Rachel,' and he could not always soothe her. Still the novelty of the fresh open air scenes was a great assistance to his endeavours; and to those who smilingly watched them walking hand-in-hand through all the purlicus of the castle, and marked the care with which Bertram guided the child's footsteps over

difficult places, it seemed that they were witnessing as pretty an idyl as ever they had heard from the lips of a minstrel.

CHAPTER XI.

ON the evening of the following day, an embassy arrived on the part of the Prioress, to reclaim her niece, and conduct her back to the convent ; inquiring also for news of Sir John, concerning whom she expressed great anxiety. These messages were delivered to Philip de Tourville by a little company of travelling friars, of whom the Prioress had entreated this service in passing the castle. In answer to this demand, Philip acquainted them with the death of Sir John ; and called upon Father Paul to bear witness that he had, before that event, united the two children in marriage.

The oldest of their number, who was the spokesman of the party, received this intimation with some appearance of disappointment ; but showed no disposition to dispute facts, which were attested by the authority of a grave and dignified priest, like Father Paul ; of whom, moreover, he had formerly heard as distinguished by his piety and zeal. Therefore, though he had received a hint not to place implicit confidence in the statements made by the Baron or his household, he appeared satisfied with the account rendered to him ; and would have taken his departure immediately, had not Philip and the Father united their entreaties, that the party of weary travellers should repose that night within the castle.

‘ Tell them to go away,’ said Bertram, whispering to Philip ; ‘ they shall not take her back.’

‘ Never doubt that,’ replied Philip ; ‘ but to bid them depart were scarce hospitable.’

Still Bertram cast some suspicious glances on the sober visitors, and appeared relieved when they left the castle early on the following morning ; apparently well-satisfied with the full accounts given them, both of the death of

Sir John d'Harancourt, and the hasty union of the two children, in accordance with his last wishes.

The Baron, on his return, was duly informed of the message sent by the Prioress, which brought a smile to his grave countenance.

'Ah,' he said, 'the holy mother will be prostrate with sorrow, I doubt not—not for the loss of my poor friend, but that his daughter has slipped from her hands. Well, when the bird has once escaped the cage, the master may whistle and call, but his prisoner will never return. I have no fear now of my lady Prioress ; it is not her hand which will unloose the knot that we have tied.'

In fact, there was no further danger to be apprehended from the interference of the Prioress. It was impossible for her to maintain, in opposition to so many witnesses, that the child's arrival at the castle had been delayed until after the death of Sir John, and that the Baron was now fraudulently detaining her ; although, in her earnest desire to break the connection, the aunt applied for support to more than one ecclesiastical authority, on the plea that her brother-in-law, enfeebled in mind and body by the approach of death, had been cajoled, if not forced, into yielding a consent which he would gladly have withheld. They were too deeply engaged, or too indifferent, to bestow much attention on the intrigues of a person, whom they regarded as somewhat too ready to concern herself with worldly affairs.

An appeal on the same subject to a secular relative, a cavalier who was credited with some influence at court, met with a still less encouraging reception.

'I know not where this should lead,' he said ; 'for to my mind, the girl is well enough bestowed. Moreover, though the Baron de Drumont is not among my friends, he bears a reputation which forbids me to believe he would resort to fraud for such an end as this ; for had it been his pleasure to mate his son, he might have commanded many a more brilliant alliance than this, with the daughter of a poor and obscure knight.'

The Prioress, then, finding all her efforts fruitless, unwillingly abandoned them.

Thus the position of Claudine in her new home became a safe and assured one ; and she was not destined soon to leave it.

The Baron had determined, for many reasons, that she should be brought up within the castle. In the first place, she was a legacy from his departed friend that he would willingly keep under his hand ; and what asylum could be found for her so safe as this ? Moreover, even had he been disposed to place her under the care of others, it would have been no small embarrassment to decide on one to whom the charge should be confided ; for it was no longer possible that her aunt, the Prioress, should be this person. He thought also that the children, being brought up together, would more readily grow into those affectionate and intimate relations which he desired for them ; and other reasons of preference and expediency, all inclined him to the same course.

The only circumstance which gave him any doubt upon this matter, was that he had long since lost his discreet and gentle lady, who might have directed the education of Claudine with more success than he could hope to do ; but this consideration caused him no great disquietude. After delivering her into the charge of the old nurse, Margery, with commands to teach her all it was fitting she should know ; and, further, assigning to her service two young women, who were brought from their neighbouring huts into the castle expressly to attend upon her ; the Baron considered that all needful provision had been made for the rearing of the little girl, and concerned himself with it no further.

It happened, not long after the death of Sir John d'Harancourt, that the Baron, riding to some distance one morning, met with his brother-in-law, the Count Hugo Fitz Gournay, who had made himself the object of so much dislike and suspicion to the honest Stephen. Stephen himself was the first to perceive his approach, and recognised it by muttering between his teeth :

‘ Aye, aye, my lord Count, you are ever to be met with, as surely as the flies in summer ; but it is not with me you have to reckon this time.’

The Baron gave no indication of having heard this observation, and whether or not he shared Stephen's distaste for the encounter, he advanced to meet the Count with an air of frank and kinsmanlike cordiality.

'Why, how now, brother?' he said: 'I had thought you in Paris, in attendance on the King.'

'The air of Paris is not sweet to me, as you well know,' replied the Count; 'and I remain there no longer than necessity bids. It is now two weeks since my return.'

'Yet you have not come to greet me after my absence,' said the Baron, with an expression of bright friendliness, which met with but a cold response from his relative.

'It is very true,' he answered, 'that I have not ridden to your castle to bid you welcome; yet in your absence I have visited it.'

At these words Stephen, who was near enough to hear the conversation as plainly as those who were themselves taking part in it, lifted his eyes for an instant to the face of the Count, and lowered them again with a somewhat malicious smile playing about his lips. The Count remarked the expression, which gave him an occasion to manifest the displeasure that had risen at the first sight of Stephen among the Baron's attendants.

'Insolent varlet,' he broke forth with heat, 'wilt thou smile to my face at the remembrance of our last meeting? Know that if thou canst recall it, neither have I forgotten. Answer me not with fierce glances, but learn to bend thine eyes upon the ground in presence of knights and nobles.'

It was with the utmost difficulty that Stephen repressed the words struggling for utterance; but he looked towards the Baron, and read in his countenance so positive a command to say nothing, that he contrived to smother his wrath and preserve a disdainful silence.

'I cannot believe,' said the Count, speaking in measured tones as he turned towards his brother-in-law, 'that you can be indifferent to the slight and contempt which has been put upon me by this upstart knave! Favoured though he has ever been by you, you will scarce desire to see your near kindred bearded by him so insolently as I have been. Though you had done me so much dishonour,

brother, as to trust your interests to the care of a low-born squire rather than to me, your nearest kinsman and most fitting custodian ; yet did I, as I have said, visit your castle in your absence, that I might be satisfied that all went well there ; but when, on my departure, I would have taken my nephew with me, purposing to keep him for some time in company with my own sons, this boorish castellan of yours needs must step forward to stay me. He forcibly restrained the child, who would have followed me, swearing roundly that I should have none of him ; and when I, moved to wrath by what seemed designed to cast suspicions on the sincerity of my regard for you and yours, would have insisted by force upon my design, he even dared to speak of armed resistance. I knew not to what lengths his mad folly might go, and deemed it best to suffer myself thus to be overborne, rather than give it range. I would know whether it is your will that such dishonour should be done me within your gates ?

The Baron during the delivery of this harangue fidgeted in his seat, while seeking words for his reply ; and when he did speak it was in a tone of conciliation.

‘ Brother,’ he said, ‘ in all that I left to his charge, my worthy Stephen hath proved himself a faithful guardian. I would not indeed that you should sustain injury at the hands of any of my household ; and if Stephen have used you with less regard than was befitting his station and yours, ascribe it not to lack of the respect he owes you, but to an anxious care for the most important charge he bore ; a charge, moreover, which he knew to be menaced by more than common danger.’

‘ And might not my vigilance suffice,’ said the Count, ‘ to defend the boy from whatever dangers could threaten him ? I asked you, Raymond de Drumont, whether you approve the action of your favourite in this matter ?’

‘ I do approve it,’ replied the Baron plainly ; ‘ he could have done no otherwise unless he had surrendered my son to you, which I would not have had him do.’

‘ Which you would not have had him to do ?’ repeated the Count. ‘ Do those words convey a doubt of my good faith ?’

'They convey no doubts,' replied the Baron, growing a little impatient of so much insistence on a subject which he thought had been already sufficiently discussed; 'and if they did?'

'And if they did?' pursued the Count, fixing his keen gray eyes intently upon him. 'Take heed to what you say, Sir Baron.'

'Why then it had not been without some grounds!' retorted the Baron, irritated by the caution into uttering what he had prudently suppressed. 'By the mass, but I will speak my thought before you or any man.'

The Count grew almost visibly paler with anger on hearing words so plain, though a quarrel had not been far from his expectation, or perhaps from his desire.

'Your tongue,' he said, 'exceeds the license of either blood or custom. I ask not what your speech may mean, it is of the kind to be explained rather by hard steel, than soft words.'

'Brother, brother,' replied the Baron, with a little flash of raillery mingling in his fiery mood, 'are we to forget so soon the ill turn you played me on the eve of our last battle, when it pleased your policy to change sides from Philip to John, with no more note of warning than the wind may give us in veering from west to north? Need I recall the cheer we made that night in your tent, and those two goblets of wine which rose to my head with so strange a power? I was no unseasoned boy, and it is no two poor cups of honest wine which can overmaster Raymond de Drumont, and lay him like a log for two days thereafter. By my soul, Fitz Gournay, when I awoke from the effects of that potion, and heard of the deeds of that glorious day, I could have wept like an infant to think that my arm had been withheld from it by treachery.'

'Hold!' cried Count Hugo, his choler rising higher; 'no man shall speak to my face of treachery. If the night's debauch unfitted you for the work of the morrow, should the blame be with the host who poured the wine; or with him whose faulty judgment could use neither rule nor measure till he had shown himself to the camp

as the man whose ill-timed revelry withheld him from the career of glory ?'

The Baron remained for an instant in silence, a cloud of wrath gathering on his brow ; but when he spoke, it was in a tone of more calmness than the Count employed, and even, as he proceeded, with some attempt at conciliation.

'Had any other man spoken thus to me, I should have said that his words were false ; but you and I are of kindred, and I have no mind for a bitter contention. Moreover, I do not revive an old quarrel ; what is dead, let it be buried. King Philip bid us join hands but two weeks after, and when I gave mine, my heart was in it. So, brother, let us put by this useless dispute, which arose I know not how, and tends to I know not what ; and ride back with me'—he added with a gleam of merriment in his eyes—'that I may return your hospitality of that night.'

'The veil by which you strive to cover your words, De Drumont,' replied the Count sneeringly, 'cannot suffice to conceal their meaning from me. If you deem that I speak falsely, I at least have no desire to avert your resentment by the plea of kinsmanship.'

The Baron impatiently struck the spurs into his horse, and made him swerve violently.

'Nay,' he said, 'if you will not have my friendship, in Heaven's name, leave it. Brother Count, it is equal to me. I do not need to beg for any man's goodwill neither.'

'If we are to choose between friendship and enmity, then,' said the Count, 'my choice will fall on the last.' As he spoke, he turned abruptly, and galloped away.

'As it would have done long ago,' said the Baron, looking after him, 'had interest pointed that way. Hugo, Hugo ! have I not learned before to-day the worth of thy friendship ? Come,' he added, turning to his companions, 'let us turn homewards, and pull no long faces over the matter. I care little for his attachment, and less for his enmity.'

The Count left the scene of this encounter with some-

thing less than the coolness displayed by the Baron ; for his native disposition was passionate and resentful, though masked in general by a cold and scornful exterior ; and had he not been almost entirely unarmed, and attended by less than half a dozen followers in the same condition, it is probable that he might not have been satisfied to part from his kinsman, without some more serious contention than the wordy war, which had yet proved sufficient to sunder their hollow and ill-cemented friendship. His wrath was not so keen, however, nor his excitement so ungovernable, as to gain an ascendancy over his habitual calculating cunning ; and within a short space of time he could have smiled at his folly, in allowing himself to be moved for a moment, by a dispute which he had himself purposely provoked. The mind of the Count Hugo might, indeed, be agitated by passion, but could be swayed by interest alone ; and the former must never be allowed its way, if there were danger of its interfering with considerations of policy.

It was not his interest at present to come to any more open rupture with his brother-in-law. His position was too insecure, his embarrassments too many for this ; although he had readily seized an occasion to rid himself of an association which had always been a source of annoyance, as soon as he felt himself able to dispense with a support, which he had once judged necessary. Nevertheless, some of the Baron's words rankled in his mind ; and might possibly be remembered, together with other circumstances, at a future day.

The Baron and his companions, meantime, rode homeward very cheerfully. There was, indeed, only one countenance overcast among the group, that of Gaston de Drumont, the nephew of the Baron ; a young man of about the same age as Philip de Tourville — who also filled the position of squire to his uncle. Reared from his childhood with kindness beneath the Baron's roof, and bound by the ties of so near a relationship, Gaston de Drumont had yet failed to attach himself to him in the same manner as the greater part of his attendants ; but as soon as he was of an age to exhibit any marked

preference, had seemed to be drawn by some attraction of sympathy towards his other uncle, the Count Hugo.

The Baron, on his side, seeming to feel, as his nephew advanced in age, that there was some vague antagonism in their natures, had ceased to manifest any very deep interest in his brother's orphan son ; and transferred it to others with whom he was more in harmony, especially Philip de Tourville, who enjoyed a particular share of his regard. The preference of Gaston for the Count had but gained strength with his years ; and now, while his companions, who for the most part were of a very opposite mind, beguiled the way with cheerful conversation, he rode on with a discontented and gloomy brow ; much regretting the difference between his two uncles, which might have the effect of greatly curtailing, if it did not altogether cut off, his intercourse with Count Hugo.

CHAPTER XII.

LITTLE Claudine found her new home a very happy one, after the few days were past in which a child, so young, could be expected to grieve for the one she had left. It was the freedom and brightness of the fresh life which delighted her : here there was no chiding, no restraint on her restless fancies ; and she spent whole days in the sun, enjoying all the sights and sounds of this new, busy world, which held so many charms for a child. It was not, of course, that her wanderings were not confined, and that within rather narrow limits ; but the bounds were wide enough for such little feet, and Claudine never felt herself restrained. The constant stir and bustle, so different from the serious precision and order to which she had been used at the convent, where mirth, if it came at all, could only whisper in corners ; the frequent din of martial exercise ; the daily coming and going from the gates ; and, not least, the number of horses, dogs, and other like living things which crowded the place ; kept

eyes and ears awake, and helped to make it a castle of enchantment to her.

Then, too, it was a strange and pleasant thing to the little girl, reared hitherto under great authority, to find Bertram ever ready to please and serve her in any of her childish fancies ; not that Bertram was always very ready to give up his own will to that of others ; but this wast he bride of whom he was still proud as a new possession, and the pretty, imperious, helpless little creature had a strange attraction for him, of which the novelty was not yet worn off.

A general pet and plaything, Claudine rambled all day at her will ; and tyrannized, as far as she found it in her heart to do, over everyone that came in her way. But it was not an unkind little heart, or, perhaps, indulgence and flattery might have wrought greater harm than they did. Most of the men in the castle adored her for her bright face and pretty ways, which could be very trustful and fondling when she pleased. She never had any scruple in appealing to anyone who might be near her for the gratification of her wishes ; and many rough fellows were not ill-pleased to feel her soft touch upon their arm, and hear her relating to them her wants, and her pleasures, with childish confidence. If there were some gloomy faces to scowl upon her, the little lady learned to know them very soon ; and kept a haughty distance ever after, knowing well that there were enough to smile. Bertram himself became her willing slave, and had been taught to be proud of being so, no less than of standing at the head of any boys who were his companions. In time, too, she began to take a more intelligent interest in his pursuits ; and would follow him about from place to place watching all that he did, and adding a new vigour to every attempt, and a new pleasure to success, by the sight of her eager attention. She would still, at times, prefer her own infantine amusements, but was being led away from them by degrees more and more.

When the winter came, however, setting in with some severity, and she saw the earth all white with snow, she did not like it so well ; and was often inclined to nestle by

the side of old Margery within, under shelter from the cutting winds that whistled through the bare tree-tops. Margery, who was only too pleased when the child would stay with her, used all her arts to amuse and attract her by means of the long ballads and tales with which her memory was well stored ; as well as by sundry comfits, and other such dainties, in the composition of which she was unrivalled.

But Bertram missed his little playmate, and tried all he could to lure her out again ; and Claudine, after a while, began to overcome her fears of the harsh winter weather, which she had never been used to brave, for she was naturally a bold and hardy child ; and very soon made the discovery that playing in the snow was an amusement quite as delightful as any summer pleasure. After this, Margery had no more peaceful mornings with her charge nestled safely in her lap, a position which Claudine was very fond of assuming ; but was in a constant state of anxiety lest the cold and wet, to which the child was so often exposed, should injure her health. It was of little use for Margery to try to persuade her to leave her play against her will, even if it were in the midst of a snow-storm ; and on one occasion, when her nurse had seized upon her hand and was trying with gentle force to lead her in, the little girl suddenly broke away from her, and, throwing herself on the ground, rolled in the snow till she was whitened all over. Then, springing up and laughing, she placed her hand again in Margery's, and suffered herself to be led away to be dressed and dried, and well shaken as well ; at which infliction she only pouted up her rosy lips and begged for kisses.

Margery watched carefully for the first symptoms of anything like cold, and when she found them, or thought she did, had recourse to some of her homely medicines to ward off the effects ; after which the child, not wishing for a repetition of the dose, became slightly more tractable. But nothing came of these frolics, except that Claudine grew stronger and ruddier, and more hardy every day ; till by the time the long hard winter was over even the nurse had learned to forget her fears.

The Baron himself had no terrors for Claudine, though she saw him but seldom, and she would climb his knees or pull at his sleeve, with the same fearless freedom she used towards any other person. Neither did he seem displeased at this, but would put her gently away from him, or perhaps hold her for a moment while he tried to trace the likeness to his lost friend, which was so strongly marked in her features. At other times he rarely noticed her; yet it chanced one day that he stood watching her from a distance at play, with some feeling of pride and satisfaction at the sight of the active vigour of her movements, and the general improvement which the past few months had wrought in her.

Not far from where Claudine was playing, a powerful bloodhound was pulling at his chain, a fierce and dangerous animal, whom few could venture to approach, and even they not without precaution. As he stood there rolling his fiery eyes and baying from time to time in impatience of confinement, he looked, indeed, a formidable object; and the Baron started with absolute terror when he saw the little girl walk boldly within reach of his chain, and, sitting down upon the ground, begin trying to coax him, and to feed him with scraps of meat. A few hasty strides carried the Baron to the spot, and, snatching up the child, he withdrew her beyond the reach of the dog, who was just beginning to growl and show his teeth in a rather menacing manner. 'I wanted to feed the great dog,' said Claudine, rather plaintively; but he paid no heed to her, and strode on, holding her in his arms till he met with Margery, who was hobbling forward as fast as she could; much terrified at the dangerous position from which she had just seen him rescue her charge.

The Baron set down his burden, and stood silent until he heard Margery begin to scold the child for 'running into the jaws of a dog that was worse than a wolf,' as she phrased it.

'Peace!' broke in the Baron authoritatively; 'wouldst thou teach her to be timid and shrinking as a peasant maid? Teach such lessons to thine own daughters, good woman, but not to thy lady; for in this lies the difference

between such as thee and thine and we of noble birth—that where the baser sort flee danger, we press on to meet it, and go to some doubtful day of peril more blithely than to a feast! And though thy little lady here may never ride in armour to the field, yet shall she not learn the mind of a coward; for her father was a gallant knight, as, by the grace of Heaven, her lord shall yet be, and I would have her to be worthy both of father and of husband!’

Nevertheless the Baron ordered the removal of the dog that very day to a place where Claudine could have no further access to him, should the same fancy seize upon her for a second time.

Claudine grew older, but her way of life was still the same, and she was subject to no real authority; for the attendants, to whose nominal charge she had been committed, were of too humble condition to be likely to exert it judiciously; and were, moreover, far more inclined to flatter and gratify the caprices of their young lady, than to cross her wishes or direct her conduct. It is true that Margery made some attempts to instruct her in needlecraft and other womanly mysteries; and Father Paul even endeavoured to teach her to read; but their efforts were not of much avail, and the Father, at least, soon discontinued them, for Claudine detested the sight of a book, even more than a needle. The old man was not, perhaps, the most skilful of teachers, and he loved tranquillity, so that a short experience of the difficulties of fixing the attention of his untamed pupil served to discourage him.

‘It wearies me, Father,’ she would say pettishly; ‘and I do not like to read in these books. Why should I learn it?’

Father Paul sighed, and answered patiently:

‘If thou wilt but learn to read, it will be of great profit hereafter; and thou mayst learn many precepts of wisdom and virtue from these pages.’

‘Bertram does not read, nor anyone but you, Father,’ said Claudine; ‘and I do not care to learn. I would rather be like them.’

The instructions of Margery were not received with much more attention; and the good old woman often

sighed when she looked over the specimens of beautiful needlework and embroidery left behind by her dear dead lady ; and thought how long it would be before anything to compare with them came from the unwilling fingers of her little charge.

‘See, then,’ she would say to her, ‘do but look upon these trailing leaves which border the pattern, and these flowers which seem as though some fairy’s hands had strewn them there ! See, too, in this other piece, with how skilful a hand those warriors are depicted on the silk—ay, and the horses ; would not one say that they breathed and moved ? Ah, Lady Claudine, you will never equal this, if you take no more care to learn now ! You it is who will come after my dear lady, and you should try to match her in her virtues and her skill.’

‘It is ugly,’ said Claudine ; ‘and the horses all look stiff, like those cut in wood. I like better to see our own horses when they come into the court ; and the roses and the violets are not like what I can find !’

‘These flowers will never fade,’ answered the nurse ; ‘and see the dainty stitching here, and the gay colours in the silks !’

‘But she must have wrought all day ; and I do not love to sit still at my work. I would be abroad in the sun !’

‘But my lady loved her needle, and you should learn to love it. She wrought the silken banner which the Baron bears with him always when he goes to war. Many weeks she toiled upon it, and would not suffer me to set a stitch ; and on the eve of his departure she worked all the night, that he might carry it with him. Then on the morrow, when he took it from her hand, he kissed the hand as though she were a queen. She was pale, like a lily ; but what a smile she gave ! He went, and they never met again ; for before his return we had laid her in her grave.’

‘You shall do the work for me,’ said Claudine, who had been giving little attention to what the old woman was saying—‘and you will, dear nurse ?—and I will play upon the grass or ride in the forest, and gather flowers all day prettier than these.’

She threw down her soiled and tumbled work, and ran out of the chamber to rush into the free air ; while Margery shook her head, but smoothed the work carefully and laid it away, and then took up her distaff, sighing.

Margery's advice and teaching upon other matters were not received with much more docility ; and Claudine grew up less carefully trained and taught than the horses or hawks, which claimed so large a share of interest from the lord of the castle. Still, she was happy, and grew both in health and beauty, which was enough to satisfy the rather superficial observation of the Baron ; and, though the old nurse affected to shake her head at times over the wild ways of her little lady, she looked upon them in general with indulgence, and even pride ; as signs of a free and lofty nature, well befitting the wife of her ' young lord.'

CHAPTER XIII.

W. WALLISON.

TEN years had passed since the death of Sir John d'Harancourt, and brought the inevitable changes which the passage of time must always bring with it. The Baron, as he watched the growth of the two children, on whom his hopes were fixed, into early youth and maidenhood, became anxious to cement the childish contract which bound them together, by stronger and more solemn ties. Changes might be at hand in the political world which should draw other consequences in their train. What if the infant marriage by which her father had sought to secure her future should prove too slender a defence for Claudine against the dangers which he had dreaded, and she should be removed from the protection which had been hers until now ?

Claudine grown into a tall and slender maiden, a woman, in the Baron's impatient eyes, and not without a certain irregular beauty, was more conspicuous now than she had been when first brought beneath his roof. Already had he remarked his nephew Gaston, now no longer an inmate

of the castle, yet no unfrequent visitor, cast some admiring glances upon the girl. Distrust of Gaston had rendered the Baron watchful, and he saw clearly in him what might well have escaped his observation in another. Then, too, life was uncertain to all : he himself might die, and he was about to depart with his son upon an expedition fraught with danger, from which he might never return alive. The English wars of Philip Augustus were about to be revived by his son ; and the Baron was obliged to leave home within the next few weeks, or even earlier. Things must not remain as they were. Bertram, thought the father, was now of an age to complete what had been begun for him ten years before.

This was the subject of the Baron's reflections, as he sat one evening in his great hall with the untasted wine standing before him. The dependants clustered together at the lower end of the hall, adapting themselves to the humour of their lord, spoke in whispers ; and were careful not to disturb his thoughtful mood by any ill-timed mirth.

At length the Baron raised his head, like one who takes a resolution, and called Bertram to his side ; at the same time sending in search of Claudine, who had withdrawn to a more private apartment.

'My children,' he said when they both stood before him ; 'children I call you, yet truly children you are no longer, and therefore it is fitting that the contract, which was made between you in your infancy, should be enforced by new and stronger bonds. For the time has now come when you may renew from your own hearts and wills, those vows which were put into your mouths when, as yet, you knew not their meaning. Bertram, my son, thou art about to depart for the first time upon an errand of danger, from which thou mayst never return. Now is the time, then, that thou shouldst take thy bride again by the hand, and repeat those promises which were first offered by the death-bed of her father.'

The Baron ceased speaking, and seemed awaiting a reply ; but the two young people looked at each other, and then at the ground, and stood silent. The intimation

had been so abrupt and unexpected, that neither could find words at first. At length Bertram replied with an air of some hesitation :

‘ You know well, dear father, and Claudine knows, that I have no other desire than to fulfil those vows ; and if there is need for that, of any further ratification of them, I am ready at this very moment to do all that which belongs to me ;’ and he cast a glance towards Claudine in which eagerness seemed mingled with a shade of doubt.

‘ My child,’ said the Baron to her, ‘ give me thy hand.’

Claudine gave it obediently, but looked up timidly and said :

‘ Bertram and I are wed already ; why must we promise again ?’

The Baron looked keenly into her upturned face to see whether there were any reluctance in it which might prove an obstacle to his cherished plans ; but he saw only a questioning look, almost childish in its innocent surprise, which seemed as though no deeper feeling could lie behind it.

‘ It is for thy better safety,’ he said ; ‘ art thou not ready to take the ring from his hand for the second time ?’

Claudine quietly permitted him to place her hand in that of Bertram, who was smiling at the thought of that first time, of which the memory was more vivid for him than for her. He did not clasp her hand, but held it lightly, almost timidly in his own ; and looking at her as his father had done, with anxious inquiry, to see if it were unwillingly given. She met his gaze with perfect frankness, and seemed so little disturbed that his doubt vanished ; it was evident that she regarded her own action simply as a matter of course.

‘ Shall our marriage be completed to-morrow ?’ he asked.

‘ No,’ replied the Baron ; ‘ for as the former was sudden and secret, and shorn of all pomp and festivity, so would I have this second bridal public and splendid, and such as befits an heir of our house. A week must at least be granted for needful preparation.’

Claudine's eyes sparkled at the thought of the fine show ; and the Baron, observing with satisfaction her animated expression, said with a smile :

'That is how we may pleasure thee, is it not, little one ?'

'Oh yes, father !' cried Claudine in a rapture of anticipation ; 'I should love to see a gay wedding before all ; and shall I be decked with the jewels Margery has often shown me, and Bertram in plumes and velvets ? and will the castle be filled with guests, and feasting, and dancing !?'

'Ay, ay,' said the Baron, pinching her cheek good-humouredly ; 'young maidens are all alike. Feasts and dances, and jewels and gay braveries—these are the matters that fill all their heads. Yes, indeed, we will trick out our bride like a queen, and she will not mar *this* bridal day with tears. Away to Margery, and bid her bring out all her richest stores, to grace the most gallant festival that ever gladdened her old heart.'

Claudine went, and Bertram followed, leaving the Baron again thoughtful and preoccupied, for the arrangements he was making for this girl, who had grown up under his eyes as a daughter, recalled very forcibly the memory of the other father, who had aided him to join the hands of the two at that earlier wedding, to which he had alluded.

When Bertram succeeded in finding Claudine again, she was so deeply engaged in discussing with Margery various important points of dress and decoration, together with many other affairs in connection with the coming festivity, that it seemed as though there would be no attention to spare for him ; but he desired to talk with her, and saw no reason why his claims should be postponed to those of frills and feathers. Indeed, he cast a rather scornful glance upon the details which occupied Claudine ; being on his side rather less attentive to questions of personal adornment, and less attracted by the pomp and magnificence of an occasion like the present, than the majority of the young gallants his contemporaries. Claudine went with him a little reluctantly.

‘What is it then, Bertram?’ she said, when he had drawn her into a secluded place, where they could walk and converse unobserved; ‘I have so much to arrange, so much to think of, with Margery.’

‘I would talk with thee for a little. Amid all the preparation and tumult of this wedding, hast thou no thoughts to spare for the bridegroom?’

‘We are together always,’ she answered, ‘and can talk whenever we will.’

‘Indeed, no,’ said Bertram; ‘many partings may be in store, and even now, within a few days, we must be divided, perhaps for long. Thou wilt think of me when I am gone?’

‘Yes, surely; I shall think very often. If I could but go also, how happy I should be!’

‘What! ride into the shock of battle with a rugged company of men-at-arms?’ said Bertram, amused. ‘Nay, the cavaliers must ride alone to warfare, and leave the ladies behind them to pray for their prosperity, and look for their happy return.’

‘I could wish myself not born a lady,’ returned Claudine, in a tone of some discontent. ‘Yes, I would I might be changed into a valiant cavalier, able to go forth to glorious adventure with the rest. I am tired of this dull castle and all around it. I should love, before all, to combat side by side with you, dealing destruction among the enemies of our king or religion, and win for myself heroic renown. That is life worth living—a nobler destiny, truly, than to sit by the side of old Margery, listening ever to her thrice-told tales, and labouring to portray profitless pictures upon silk with our needles.’

‘My sweet little bride,’ exclaimed Bertram, surprised at the sentiments she expressed; ‘thou couldst not. Thy gentle soul would recoil in horror from the scenes of blood and desolation, which form a fitting field for the enterprise of sterner spirits.’

Claudine tossed her head impatiently. She spoke half in jest, yet there was a true under-current of dissatisfaction beneath her words. The life she led did not content her, and she would have grasped eagerly at any fresh awaken-

ing influence which might have filled it with a deeper, wider interest.

‘I could,’ she declared boldly; ‘and I wish truly that I might. Though a woman, I am not soft and feeble. Bertram, think you that there is truth in the tales of powerful enchanters, who can do all they will with the touch of a wand; and that I might somewhere find one to transform me?’

‘If there be such a power,’ replied Bertram very seriously, ‘I have never heard that it came from heaven. Claudine, all this is idle. Let us talk of what I wished to think of—this marriage. I would know whether you agree to it of your full and free will?’

‘Why ask me that?’ she said, with a surprised glance at him, ‘Why should I not willingly agree to this festival? and, then, it is your father’s fixed purpose.’

‘Think nothing of my father now, but answer me.’

‘Bertram, I cannot understand,’ she replied, with knitted brows; ‘we have already been united from our first childhood. What difference can this second marriage make?’

‘That early union is a tie which might perhaps be broken,’ said Bertram steadily, while he took her hand, and obliged her to look fully in his face; ‘should we renew it now, it must be bound more strongly, in all likelihood for life. Claudine, before doing this you must understand it all. If it is not your will that we should remain always together; if you would not readily be mine for life, tell me so now; and we may find means by which you may be altogether freed. Do not fear my father; he is kind and indulgent, and you shall not be coerced.’

He spoke with a certain anxiety in look and tone, but still in the tone of decision which Claudine had learned to know expressed firm resolution. If she had needed his protection then against the anger or tyranny of another, she would have flown to it instantly, in sure reliance on its strength and safety.

‘I do not wish to leave you,’ she answered frankly, as she laid the disengaged hand upon his arm; ‘why should you think it? you have ever been kind to me.’

Bertram was satisfied. There had been no glow of passion in his eyes ; only a slight shade of trouble, which died away as he looked at her, and brightened into a smile. Then he took her hand and kissed it. The little playmate, so long familiar, seemed to have taken a new relation to him within that hour, demanding a more chivalrous respect. Claudine was conscious of no change, and only smiled back at him brightly, when she saw the unwonted seriousness disappear.

‘I am glad you are smiling again now,’ she said ; ‘you almost frightened me by looking so grave. If you look like that on the marriage-day, it will seem like a black thunder-cloud.’

‘That would be an ill-omen indeed,’ he answered gaily. ‘Do not fear me. He who brings a clouded brow or a moody heart to a festival, should be banished to a solitary hermitage, with none but his own ill company. It was only that I had a little doubt of thee ; but now it is past. This is no time, in sober truth, when I could find it in my heart to be sad. Thou callest this castle dull and dreary, and would fain go beyond it ; but thou dost not, canst not know the joy with which a *man* breaks loose from the boyish pastimes, which filled his life before, and rushes into the wide fields of struggle and of glory. Thy impatience is but that of the captive dove, who beats her wings against the bars awhile, but is soothed at last, and makes her home there to rear her brood in sweet content. But ours resembles that of the caged eagle, who watches the longed-for prey from hour to hour as it skims round his native rocks, and pines and struggles to the last ; and if the prison door be not opened, soon the noble bird will break his heart.’

‘I will not be a quiet dove,’ said Claudine, catching a gleam of the enthusiasm with which Bertram had poured forth his last words ; ‘I will be like the eagle, too.’

Bertram passed his hand over his forehead and laughed.

‘This is but wild talk,’ he said ; ‘go now to Margery again, and talk of velvets and laces. I will go to see my arms well brightened.’

CHAPTER XIV.

FOR some days the pleasant bustle of preparation pervaded the castle, and Claudine delighted in it all with the ardour of a very young girl, for whom pleasure had not yet lost its novelty, nor excitement its first zest. Now, however, an event took place which changed the Baron's plans, and fell upon all her fancies and anticipations like an unexpected hailstorm. It was about the time of noon, a sunny spring day, and Claudine had ridden to the verge of a fine forest, which was one of the Baron's favourite hunting grounds, when he found more leisure to indulge in such a pastime than the present times afforded him. She was, rather to the regret of her female attendants, exceedingly fond of horse exercise; and they were compelled to accompany her for many a weary mile, when they would have wished to sit quietly at home, pursuing some tranquil occupation. To ride along the margin of this forest was a great attraction to Claudine, who delighted in the occasional glimpses of still woodland scenery, and the rustling of great boughs above her head; indeed, she was at this moment within it, for she had slipped for a time out of the sight of her attendants; a thing she was in the habit of doing oftener than the Baron suspected, or would have approved; and had gone under the shelter of a large oak, which overshadowed an open space a little within the forest boundaries. She had dismounted, and now stood caressing the small but beautifully-shaped horse, who seemed to regard her with the most confiding affection. Her arms were thrown round his neck, and she was talking softly to him in the old childish way, but in so low a tone that her words could not be heard by one standing by. She was talking of the subject which filled her whole thoughts—the gay wedding, which was now but two days distant—and the serious, affectionate eyes of the animal might almost have encouraged the fancy that he understood and sympathized in her pleasure.

As she stood facing the interior of the forest, with the

sound of the wind and her own voice in her ears, it was some time before she was warned by the sound of a horse's footsteps, muffled by grass and moss, that some person was approaching from behind. Hastily turning then, in the dazzling light, she saw only at the first glance that it was no one of her companions, but a young cavalier well mounted and appointed, who was pacing slowly over the uneven sod to all appearance unaccompanied. Claudine was almost as fearless now as when the innocence and ignorance of childhood had lent her boldness, and instead of trying to escape the meeting, stood with her hand upon her horse's mane, quietly watching the advancing horseman. The next instant she laughed gaily upon recognising in him the nephew of the Baron, Gaston de Drumont, whom she had been accustomed to see at intervals at the castle. He sprang to the ground, and saluting her with great deference, said in a tone of surprise :

'My uncle shows himself less careful of a charge so precious than I could have believed possible, if the Lady Claudine is thus left to roam unattended and uncared for. Does he not know that there are always dangers enough in store for the young, the defenceless, and the beautiful ?'

'It wearies me to be for ever attended,' she said, 'and I ride forward whenever I can. Will you, too, use me as a prisoner, Sir Gaston, who must never go without a guard ?'

'Not as a prisoner, sweet lady,' replied he ; 'but as men use their chiefest riches, which are not exposed recklessly to the sight of all.'

As he spoke he assisted her to mount with a degree of care which seemed to have the effect of embarrassing her movements, and she exclaimed with a touch of impatience :

'For pity's sake, Sir Gaston, leave me free ! I am not afraid of my faithful roan.'

Sir Gaston threw his own reins over his arm, and walked by her side for some distance without speaking, while he gazed alternately into her face and on the ground.

'You are deep in thought to-day,' observed Claudine presently ; 'it is long since we have seen you at the castle, yet when you come you find no words.'

'Shall I tell you why I am thoughtful?' answered the young knight abruptly. 'It is because I have heard that the Baron de Drumont purposes marrying you for the second time to my young cousin, his son.'

'And if you have heard truth, Sir Gaston, as truth it is, is that a reason why you should wear a gloomy brow? I have ever heard that such festivities are occasions of mirth and rejoicing.'

'Not to all, Claudine ; not to all,' he replied in a tone that seemed like a sudden and involuntary outburst of feeling. Then, resuming a more indifferent manner, he added : 'But I would fain know how far this decision of the Baron's is pleasing to you.'

'A gay pageant pleasing to me? Why should you doubt it?' said Claudine. 'And why put these strange questions, which are such as Bertram asked me?'

'Because,' replied Sir Gaston, slowly and steadily, 'I had hoped to hear from your lips that it was displeasing ; I had hoped for at least that consolation.' Then she heard him mutter under his breath, 'It is villainous !'

'You had hoped to find it a displeasure to me?' answered Claudine, looking at him with astonished eyes. 'You are talking so strangely as to terrify me. What is villainous?'

'To terrify you would be my last wish,' said the knight, in his most soft and gentle tones ; 'but the words that are in my heart will no longer be withheld. Before those childish nuptials had received an added strength they might have been readily broken ; but now, Claudine, now where you have been bound with cords of silk, they are forging chains of iron.'

Too much astonished to make any reply in words, she could only gaze at him, and wonder what could be his meaning. Could this really be so terrible a step, on which Bertram had gravely bid her reflect, and Sir Gaston spoke in so much stronger terms? Why then had the Baron,

her father, as she affectionately styled him in her heart, so urged it upon her?

‘You shall know,’ he continued in the same carefully-modulated tone, ‘why the tidings I had heard have saddened, have afflicted me. It is that I had hoped to have had the right to tell you one day, if I might not tell it now, that my service, my devotion, is freely laid at your feet. I would have prayed that you might be my guiding star, my impulse to achievement, the prize of victory. And by this hand,’ he continued with a more fiery look and manner; ‘but it *is* villainous that the heart of youth should thus be bound, shackled, before it has learnt the meaning of fervent love.’

Claudine, with a vague feeling of terror, strove to edge away from him, but his hand was on her bridle, and she had no means of escape.

‘What is it that you mean?’ she said, looking full at him with a kind of desperate courage. ‘Bertram is my lord, and I cannot surely have more knights than one. I am wed already—you know that I am wed already.’

‘Call not that mockery a marriage,’ was the vehement answer; ‘marriage is not the enforced union of two childish hands; it is the outcome of a fresh, warm, and living love, such as there is in my heart for you; such as I had hoped might yet one day awake in yours towards me.’

As he ceased speaking, he seized the hand which lay lightly on her horse’s mane, and kissed it.

‘You take too much freedom, Sir Gaston,’ flashed Claudine, turning her indignant eyes full upon him as she snatched away the hand with a childish petulance, at which he could have smiled, but that he knew his part too well. He said no more in the same strain, knowing that enough, if not too much, had been said already, and willing to leave his words to work their own effect for the time. Murmuring a soft excuse, therefore, which Claudine either did not, or would not hear, he turned to mount his horse; and perhaps was not sorry to perceive that they were about to be joined by the little band of attendants in nominal charge of Claudine, who had been anxiously seeking her.

Claudine immediately summoned two women to ride beside her, while Sir Gaston fell a few steps behind, remarking with a little amusement the air of dignified coldness which she had suddenly assumed towards him. He had little anxiety. Could it be so hard for him to gain this simple child, he thought—for him, who had so long been used to the sunshine of ladies' favour? The thought of the projected marriage festival did not greatly trouble him, for he had good reasons for believing that it was likely to be delayed. Neither did he think it need be a hopeless endeavour to set aside that former union, of which Claudine had reminded him so earnestly; and urged on in part by a genuine fancy for her, and in part by a determination not to be thwarted in the pursuit of any aim he had once set before him, the young knight was unable to see any obstacle to the fulfilment of his desires in the matter, which might not be overcome by his persistence and address.

On arriving at the castle, Claudine was surprised to find, by the stir and excitement pervading it in every part, that some event of importance must have occurred since she quitted it; and springing to the ground, she threw her reins into the first pair of hands outstretched to receive them, and hastened away to discover the cause; paying no attention to Sir Gaston, who followed her nevertheless, though at some distance.

Claudine persisted in her search till she had found the Baron, busied like all the rest in preparation for what seemed a sudden and speedy departure; and displaying in his countenance and bearing a degree of fire and vigour, not inferior to that which he might have shown twenty years earlier, before his hair was streaked with gray. Claudine instantly ran up to him, and he turned aside from his important affairs to speak with her.

'Thou art in good time, my daughter,' he said, with a fatherly caress, 'for within an hour or two we must quit the castle; and as none could find thee, my pretty truant, we might have left without leave-taking.'

'But what does it mean?' she asked in surprise; 'and must you go this evening?'

‘Ay, and this hour,’ replied the Baron, ‘but let not the reasons perplex thee ; or seek them of Bertram, who comes yonder, and leave me to these weightier matters. This must postpone thy bridal-day, but never fret for that ; and we shall have a yet gayer one on our return. Only one last word, dear child,’ he added, drawing her closer to him, and speaking in a cautiously lowered tone ; ‘remember to walk discreetly, and hold such state as is meet for young maidens. Go not alone, and suffer no freedom from strangers. Thou art something over-wild, I fear, and will not brook the common restraints of ladies yet ; credit me, there are more dangers which ever threaten such as thee, than thy simple heart can dream of. Use prudence, therefore, that we may find thee still in safety when we again reach home.’

Bertram had already come up, and now stood by his father’s side, clad, as Claudine had seldom seen him, in a suit of armour, which accorded not ungracefully with his young athletic figure and eager countenance. Claudine turned towards him when she was released, and then the Baron, lifting his eyes, perceived for the first time that Gaston de Drumont stood before him, silently awaiting his leisure.

‘Why, nephew !’ he exclaimed in surprise, but frankly extending his hand, ‘I heard nought of your coming. Was it on the winds you rode, or have you borrowed that wondrous cap the minstrels tell of, which can screen the wearer from sight until he pull it off, that you drop down among us thus suddenly ?’

‘Neither, my lord,’ replied the younger man, with a deferential air, ‘but I came in the train of the fair Lady Claudine, and it would seem that you found so many charms in her presence as not to have remarked mine.’

The Baron glanced toward Claudine, who had walked apart in conversation with Bertram, and his face became somewhat more serious, and his tone a little less cordial.

‘And now that you are here, Gaston, let me know the purpose of your visit, for my time is short. Hast come to join our march against the English ?’

His nephew shook his head with a smile.

‘Indeed no, my uncle,’ he replied, ‘and it was grief to me when first I heard that the new King had revived that war ; as if he thought that the King of England had not lost lands enough already. My purpose was simply to take leave of you, as I had heard you were like to be summoned in haste, and to assure you of my grateful and dutiful affection.’

‘Farewell, then,’ said the Baron, again taking his hand, ‘farewell till we meet again ; and that will be, as I trust, at a marriage feast.’

The eyes of Sir Gaston flashed with a sudden fire, and were bent intently upon the ground ; then, as the Baron was turning away, he arrested him by the question :

‘Is there nothing in which I can do you service, honoured uncle, during the time of your absence ?’

‘Why, none that I know of,’ replied the Baron, fixing his eyes rather keenly upon him ; ‘and, indeed, I should esteem it a favour if you would forget the way to my castle during that time, and frequent it something less than you have done of late.’

Then perceiving the angry and mortified flush which overspread the features of the young man, he forcibly took his reluctant hand, and breaking in upon the words he was about to utter, continued with much kindness :

‘Think not, my dear nephew, that it is from any want of good-will towards you that I have given you this caution ; it is but for the sake of the dear child I leave behind, whom I may well call daughter. Placed as she is, and in a situation so unprotected, it is not well that gay cavaliers should be said to hover about her ; and you must give me leave to say, moreover, that I have sometimes thought your eyes more occupied than need be in reading her fair countenance. Therefore, though I hope to leave our pretty princess guarded with all needful care, I would fain trust to your honour and courtesy to refrain from her company until my return.’

Sir Gaston apparently permitted his first feeling of offence to be softened by the cordial manner of his uncle, but he simply bowed in answer to these words, and turned to leave a place where it appeared evident that his presence was not desired.

CHAPTER XV.

BERTRAM, in the meantime, had drawn Claudine into a retired spot, where their last interview might be unobserved.

‘Bertram, what does this mean?’ she began at once, ‘what is it that has changed the Baron’s purpose thus suddenly?’

‘Oh, that is no great matter,’ answered the youth; ‘my father learned that the plans of King Louis were to be carried out with more promptness than he had been aware of; and, lest he should come in a laggard, he began at once to hasten his going. And, indeed, with rapid marching we shall be none too soon.’

‘But his mind seemed set upon this wedding which is now to be postponed.’

‘Ay, but,’ said Bertram, ‘to celebrate it before our departure were an impossibility, for our good old Father being absent, as you know, to find another priest who might fill his place would cause a delay of hours. Then, too, the grand ceremonial by which my father wished to grace the day must have been foregone; so it seemed that he could not but defer it altogether, until we are once more at home.’

‘And when will that be?’ asked Claudine, rather sadly, for she was much disappointed at the delay of her marriage.

Bertram, on the other hand, seemed to think little of this; and wore an air of animation, and even excitement, not very usual with him. It was the thought of entering so soon upon glorious action which brought the new look into his face.

‘How can I tell?’ he laughed in answer; ‘you must seek an astrologer to tell of the duration and fortune of wars. This sudden summons pleasures thee less than it does me, Claudine,’ he added, looking at her rather downcast face.

‘Indeed,’ she replied, in a tone of some vexation, ‘I could have wished the King had been in less haste, and

that your departure had been delayed until after the wedding, for I am loth indeed to miss it. It has been my one thought for days, and my heart has been ever more set on it every hour. I have never seen a grand festival.'

'Thou wilt not miss it, for it is but deferred,' said Bertram more gravely; for he was sorry to see a cloud of disappointment on her face. 'In truth,' he added frankly, 'I had almost forgot the marriage-day in my joy at what lies before us; yet shall I grieve if it distresses thee. But is it the feast alone that wakens thy regret?'

'No,' said Claudine, 'I would we might be wed speedily, Bertram, if Sir Gaston might be withheld thereby from using such words to me as he said but now.'

'And what were they?' demanded Bertram, with a fiery tone and gesture. 'By heavens, if he have but ventured to speak the name of love to thee——'

Claudine repeated to him very faithfully the substance of what Sir Gaston had said to her, speaking with an indignant glow, which Bertram was glad to see; but she was at a loss to understand why her communication should disturb him so much, and as he walked to and fro for a few moments, muttering wrathful words which she could not hear, she followed him in some anxiety, trying to calm his mood.

'Do not be angry, Bertram,' she said, 'with me there is no cause; and for Sir Gaston, he is absent, and he will not say words like these again.'

'It were best that he did not,' said Bertram, rather grimly; 'and what was thy answer, Claudine, to all this?'

'I told him that I understood him not, and then I chid his freedom and would have no more of his company. No one shall hold such talk with me but you, Bertram.'

Bertram smiled well pleased, and said, playing with the small hand of which he had possessed himself:

'Dear little wife, I owe you thanks; and I, too, would fain have our union complete, but that cannot be yet; but thou art my true lady, and I shall be a faithful Knight. Claudine, thou knowest what is the practice of ladies when their cavaliers ride forth to battle. Hast no favour that I may wear in my crest?'

‘What shall I give?’ she asked, looking up a little puzzled.

‘What thou wilt,’ he answered, smiling at her hesitation.

Claudine looked doubtfully at her dress, which was of extreme simplicity for a young lady of that period, and said :

‘I have no gloves, then I must cut a tress away ;’ and she proceeded recklessly to cut away two or three long curls, which she handed to him, quite regardless of his remonstrance.

‘Stay, Claudine, thou wilt give me too much. I should ill-like to miss it from where it grew.’

She laughed.

‘Curls grow again, Bertram, or, if they did not, why should we heed ?’

‘See,’ he said abruptly, ‘my father summons me, and I must go ! Thou wilt grant a kiss before we part ? and stand to watch us as we ride away ? I shall turn for the last glance as we go.’

Claudine obediently mounted to a position where she could be seen from a little distance, and saw not only Bertram, but the Baron, turn round to cast a lingering gaze upon the castle. When at length the last horseman had vanished from her sight, a strange, desolate feeling of loneliness came over the girl, which she was quite unable either to account for or resist ; and, crouching down by the stone wall on which she leaned, she began to cry as pitifully as any tired, over-excited child. So Margery found her soon after, and was half glad, half sorry to see her darling in tears on such a day. Surely it was fitting that she should weep after parting with such a gallant young cavalier, as the old dame fondly designated her first nursling.

It was the constant practice of the Baron de Drumont to prefer reposing confidence in men who were bound to his interests by long service, and that personal attachment which might be expected to arise from an almost absolute dependence on himself, rather than in those of his own condition, the sincerity of whose friendship he had fewer

means of testing, and whose views and interests might chance to clash with his own. The custodian he left behind him on this occasion was an old retainer, only a little less faithful and highly-valued than Stephen—a man whose advancing age incapacitated him for the active exertions of the field, though not at all for his present charge.

Claudine felt strangely solitary when thus left to herself in the half-deserted castle. Her old nurse noticed with some anxiety the frequent fits of listlessness and sadness which seemed now to oppress her. The young lady, much to the relief of those who were responsible for her safety, seemed to have lost something of her fancy for straying far from home; and, while keeping more closely to the precincts of the castle, she no longer endeavoured to avoid the watchful care of her attendants. This was a change Margery observed with pleasure; but she employed all the art she was mistress of to revive the drooping spirits of her lady.

‘Never be downcast, my lamb,’ she said, ‘in thinking of the young Baron; bless his handsome face! All partings foretell the meeting again, and before many months are past we shall see the Baron and all his following ride as gallantly into the castle again, as they left it a week since. Oh! I may speak of these things; for how many times have I watched them go forth with fear at my heart, and return again with joy and triumph? I have no fears now; and truly I have come to think that a valiant heart can protect against the perils of battle more surely than a wizard’s spells. And for my young lord, Lady Claudine, rather than mourning for his absence, you should strive to keep your eyes bright, and your heart light, to greet his return.’

Claudine accepted her nurse’s consolations as they were given, though the old woman had failed in her conjectures as to the cause of her depression. Her spirits, indeed, had always been more uneven than anyone accustomed to see her in her playful moods would have imagined; and now it was not regret for Bertram’s absence, or anxiety as to his safety, which overshadowed her, but a sudden

sense that seemed to come upon her of the narrowness and emptiness of her life within those walls ; and an almost passionate desire to know what existence had to offer in the wide, rich world that lay beyond. Her eyes would often fill with tears as she gazed into the fertile landscape, with a vague fancy that somewhere in the distance lay the future which was concealed from her knowledge ; and an eager desire to learn whether it was as colourless and objectless as her present life appeared to her.

‘ When will it end ? ’ she would think, with a kind of impatient spurning of all that then surrounded her. ‘ When shall I be free to quit this dreary place, and see what there is in the world beyond for me ? Surely life means more than this. Oh ! if I were a man, as Bertram is, I might go forth in search of adventure ; but to be cribbed for ever within these stone walls, I shall grow to loathe them quite at last ! ’

This mood of mind was not likely to last very long, and after a few days of listless wandering and brooding, very unlike her usual busy idleness, Claudine seemed to regain her usual bright spirits, and threw herself with renewed zest into all the amusements which had formerly interested her.

CHAPTER XVI.

SIR GASTON DE DRUMONT did not appear to think it needful even to feign respect for the last wishes which his uncle had expressed to him ; and his horse was never so often seen standing at the gates, his attendants never so frequently pressed into the courtyard, of the castle as now, during the absence of its lord. The old retainers privately shook their heads over these constant visits, but they could not well refuse to admit one who stood in so close a relationship to the Baron—one who, from having been bred within its walls, they had learned to look upon as almost a son of the castle. Their scruples were quieted,

moreover, by observing the reserve which their young lady seemed careful to use in all her intercourse with him. Claudine was learning fast in those days, and, having been once alarmed by the tone Sir Gaston seemed disposed to assume towards her, was cautious not to permit him any further opportunities of displaying it. He observed with a covert smile that Claudine was never now to be found alone—she had one at least of her women, with perhaps some other persons, constantly at her side—and he was disposed to consider this as a token that the words he had poured into her ear on the occasion of their former meeting still lingered in her memory, and, as he was pleased to hope, might begin to influence her heart. He never recurred to them, content to leave them to their secret work ; but contrived to render his conversation so agreeable, chiefly by detailed accounts of warlike exploits and perilous adventures, in all of which he assigned to himself a prominent part, that Claudine was more inclined to desire than to discourage his visits ; for her life was lonely, and these were the only incidents which occurred to lighten them.

The old nurse, who might be considered to have the best right to judge in such a case, seemed to see no cause for alarm in this intercourse ; and received the hint with a knowing smile when an old servitor once gravely directed her glance to the spot where Claudine stood beside the young knight, who was arrayed with all the fantastic magnificence he was apt to assume on such occasions, as a further means of recommending his merits in the eyes of a young and untaught girl.

‘What is thy thought, Mistress Margery,’ said the old man in a meaning tone, ‘of all this constant converse, and these gay braveries ? Methinks I have seen our young cavalier something too often go forth over this bridge, with a smile as of triumph on his lip, and with the air of a man drawing nearer at every stride to some fair prize, which he hopes to seize upon ere long. But whatever may be our fancies upon the matter, I can make a shrewd guess upon his, and it is that he is fast finding favour in the sight of our little lady.’

'Oh, he!' replied Margery, with an accent of something like contempt—'he is of those who deem the charm of their gallantries and fripperies must needs make their way to any lady's heart, if she do but look upon them. He thinks that he may stand in the midst of a parterre of bright flowers, and pluck the rarest without thought and without recompense; but I tell thee, Master Richard, our young lady is of a different mind, and she will never be won by an embroidered cap that covers but an empty head; by a gay doublet without a high heart beneath it; and a dainty sword that, I will warrant, was never drawn in earnest battle!'

'And let me tell thee, Mistress Margery,' rejoined her companion, 'that every head is not empty that is covered by a brodered cap and plume; and that a velvet doublet may conceal a heart as full of craft as thine is of simplicity and good faith. For my part, I would my lord were here, or that my young lady were more strictly guarded.'

'That is what you men will ever say,' replied Margery; 'but credit me, a woman's surest guard lies in her own true heart and prudent mind, and, wanting these, none other will much avail her. I have no fears for my lady, for I know him to the core, as well as my own sweet child, and I tell thee that her mind is set too high for him.'

It was perhaps well for Claudine, notwithstanding, that her mind was soon occupied by an event which, however unfortunate for her in other respects, served at least to turn her mind from more dangerous subjects. This was the death of the venerable Father Paul, which took place as he was returning from a pilgrimage, the fatigues of which, at his advanced age, had perhaps assisted to hasten his end. Claudine had regarded him with much love, and in him she had lost one upon whose wise care and counsels the Baron had counted much for her advantage; but now her sorrow for his loss served her, perhaps, as well as his living counsels could have done, in aiding her to pass with safety through a somewhat trying time.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE brief and comparatively unimportant war, by which Louis the Lion sought to complete the work of his father in wresting from the English all their possessions in France, was drawing near to its close. The Baron de Drumont appeared to have passed through its dangers without sustaining severe loss or bodily injury ; for, as he rode briskly at the head of his whole troop down a swelling hill, upon a fresh breezy autumn morning, his bronzed and manly, though homely, countenance wore so hale and cheerful an expression, that it was obvious the toils and cares of the past year had weighed but lightly on his spirit.

He was talking cheerfully with his son, who was close at his side ; and those who followed were also conversing gaily among themselves, for they had heard rumours of a possible return home at no very distant date, and their spirits rose high at the prospect. Bertram had the same sparkle of hopeful anticipation in his eyes ; and the face he turned towards his father seemed to have drawn its inspiration from the bracing air of the morning, in the brightness of its energy.

‘Thou art like all boys, Bertram,’ said the Baron, in a good-humoured tone ; ‘ever impatient in tranquillity for the turmoil of war ; and then sighing, after a few months of service, for the calm delights of peace. For me, did the judgment for peace or war lie in my mouth, I would say it were blind folly in our King to sheath the sword so long as the English hold a footing on the soil of France, were it but one town.’

‘And yet, my lord,’ said Bertram, smiling, ‘it had seemed to me that the thought of a speedy return was far from unpleasing to you.’

‘That may well be,’ replied his father ; ‘for there are many reasons why the warrior looks joyfully to the homeward march ; but that says nothing for the King’s policy.’

Continually, as they rode along, the Baron turned his

head to watch for the approach of Stephen, whom he had left behind to gather some necessary information, and whose return seemed to him long delayed. It was delayed so long, indeed, that the Baron speedily grew both impatient and uneasy. He ceased to converse on other matters, and rode for some time at a foot pace, while a shade of dissatisfaction settled on his brow. At last, however, the fears he had begun to entertain were relieved by the sight of Stephen riding rapidly towards him, like one very conscious that he was waited for.

‘I had thought we were to miss thee from our company for the day,’ said the Baron a little gruffly; ‘but now that thou art with us again, let us ride forward, in Heaven’s name. We have not many moments to spend in loitering.’

‘None ever knew me to loiter yet, I think,’ said Stephen, still keeping his horse abreast with that of the Baron, as though he had something further to communicate, even after his errand had been delivered; ‘but when a man must drag what he needs to know from the perverse tongues of slow-witted peasants, as easy to guide as their own herds of swine, and then force his way for a good league through tangled brake and watercourses, it may not always be done in an hour. However, I broke away from all hindrance at the last, and whom think you that I passed upon the road, my lord?’

‘How can I tell?’ returned the Baron impatiently. ‘If there is aught to be known, let me hear it, and do not seek to keep me guessing enigmas.’

‘It was the Count Fitz Gournay,’ said Stephen, ‘with a good following. They were going at a lazy pace when first I saw them; but after I had shot ahead, I heard their horse-hoofs behind me at a brisk trot. They will be before us soon if we make not better speed.’

‘The Count Fitz Gournay!’ echoed the Baron in surprise; ‘he is ever to be found when least looked for. I knew not that he was in France.’

‘In my experience,’ said Stephen with a sardonic smile, ‘if there is one face the sight of which is displeasing, we shall find it start up before us at every turn, as they say

a man is pursued by the spirit of one he has murdered ; and I dare swear the Count has the same thoughts of you.'

'Did it seem that thou wert known to anyone?' inquired the Baron musingly.

'I cannot be sure, my lord,' replied Stephen, 'yet from the scowl the Count gave as I rode by, I judged he knew me, and returned him look for look ; for I always render back to every man what he gives me, and have found it a fair rule by which to go through this world honestly.'

Bertram laughed, and then, turning his head, remarked that the Count's party was already in sight, and gaining upon them every moment.

'Let us spur on, then,' said the Baron, 'and not let them pass us.'

Accordingly they rode on more briskly, but after a little while the Baron, looking round, saw, to his surprise, that the party behind was still gaining upon him, and was now so near that he almost thought he could distinguish some of the persons composing it. He now checked his horse, and went at a foot pace, intending to allow the Count to pass him. This, however, he did not do, and at the end of a few moments their relative positions were still unaltered.

'By the soul of King Philip,' exclaimed the Baron angrily, 'this is too much. Would he follow and watch me unawares? By my faith, then, he shall ride for it,' and he urged his horse to a gallop, which had only the effect of carrying him on before his followers, who, not so well mounted as himself, were unable long to maintain the same pace. Seeing this, he wheeled round, and allowed them to rejoin him, fuming with vexation, as he proceeded, at the idea of being so closely observed.

He was once on the point of sending back one of his train to demand the reason of these strange motions, but was dissuaded from the purpose ; observing, moreover, that the party of the Count had so fallen back that the figures of the horsemen were but just discernible, and presently disappeared altogether. They had, perhaps, perceived that they were observed ; but, at all events, in the course of the next half hour they did not appear again, though

the Baron was continually looking back with something of the uneasy sensation which a man feels who is conscious of persons walking behind him in the dark, and knows not how near they may be.

At the end of this time, Bertram, whose eyesight was peculiarly keen and far-reaching, said that he could perceive the glitter of lances and the waving of banners in front, by which he judged that they were advancing to meet a numerous company. The clamour of conversation which had been going forward rather noisily for the last few moments was instantly hushed ; and as they paused for an instant to listen, Stephen first, and then the others one by one, distinctly heard the tramp of horses' feet above the whistling and howling of a high wind. By degrees a strongly armed troop emerged into full view before them, and the Baron, seeing that they were English, cast a few quick glances over his own body of men at arms, bidding them hold themselves ready for a speedy conflict, and calling to a squire to give him his helmet, shield, and such other parts of his armour as he had laid aside in order to ride with less encumbrance. These preparations occupied but a few instants, and the Baron completed them with the most cheerful good-will and alacrity, remarking, as he drew the last buckle tight :

‘Now we are indeed the sons of fortune ; there is nothing which can pleasure me more than a brush with these English, and my blood is growing cold for the want of sharp exercise.’

‘We have no play before us there,’ said Stephen, looking steadily before him ; ‘they are twice our numbers at least.’

‘Then our blows must be of double force,’ replied the Baron, laughing confidently ; and before ten minutes were over he was in the midst of the conflict he had been longing for. It seemed at first as though the suggestion of the Baron were to be acted upon, and to meet with instant success, for the impetuosity of his first charge was so great that the adversary appeared almost overborne at once by the shock ; but this superiority was not likely to last long, when the contending parties, though unequal

in numbers, were identical in race, bore similar arms, and were governed by the same military spirit and traditions. The superior force began soon to make itself felt, and the Baron was forced back some distance ; though he contested the ground with great stubbornness, and at last made a determined stand upon a little wooded hill, where he remained for many minutes fighting against odds which, if not desperate, were at least formidable enough to call for the exercise of all the skill, courage, and prudence, which could be summoned to the aid of a strength scarcely equal to the task it had undertaken. The Baron was soon engaged hand-to-hand with the leader of the English party, who was a tall and powerful knight, superbly equipped and mounted ; while Stephen, close at his side, strove his hardest to force back the fast onpressing enemy by rapid and powerful strokes of his battle-axe ; at the same time warding off many blows aimed at the Baron, who was far too deeply engaged to pay attention to any side-attacks, or even to observe them.

Bertram, on his part, had singled out younger antagonists, and used every effort to attest his worthiness of the newly-won knighthood, which dated but from the day before. Thus all were for a while too busy to observe much of what was passing around, but in a short time the Baron himself, Stephen, and every other experienced man in their company, saw clearly that fortune was not on their side, and they must finally be overpowered.

At the very instant when this conviction forced itself upon their minds, the sound of cheerful shouts and ringing hoofs rapidly advancing from behind announced the arrival of another party to this hardly-contested skirmish. The Baron and Stephen, who had fought themselves breathless, had for an instant suspended their violent exertions ; and neither could resist turning his head to see whether they were to be surrounded by enemies or assisted by friends ; while Bertram turned aside a blow which was directed with telling force at his father's now defenceless head, and in so doing received a cut upon the wrist. Stephen recognised in an instant the party of the Count Hugo Fitz Gournay, and the three moons

which were his cognizance ; and exclaimed in a tone which might almost have been described as a subdued shout :

‘ A rescue, a rescue ! By St. Denis, but I never thought to find the Count a welcome comer.’

They now addressed themselves again to the conflict with renewed vigour, and, being speedily reinforced, the tide of fortune turned in their favour, and the opposing party began in turn to give ground. The Baron, with enthusiastic exultation, hastened to follow up the advantage, and in the first eagerness to press forward, the close order of his followers was broken, and they became scattered among those of the Count : all were too much carried away by the moment’s excitement to note what befell a companion, or even a leader.

The Baron was standing in the thick of the fray, for he had been unhorsed, and had not yet found opportunity to remount, and was mingling ringing blows with cheerful shouts of encouragement to his companions, when he felt himself suddenly struck from the side with a well-aimed and deadly thrust, which pierced him just where the armour had been hacked away, and left him without defence. As he reeled and fell, he turned swiftly in the direction from which the blow had come ; so rapidly indeed, that he was able to recognise in his assailant no other person than his brother-in-law, the Count, who had stood for an instant to watch the effect of his treacherous attack. One stern glance flashed from the Baron’s eyes in reply to the dark and sinister gaze bent upon him, and then he fell back in a state of half-stupor, with his bare head almost buried in the coarse, rank grass among which he had fallen.

Amid the general tumult which prevailed, it was some little time before the followers of the Baron perceived that he was down ; and when they became aware of it they had already rushed on in pursuit of the now flying enemy to a distance of nearly a quarter of a mile beyond the spot on which he lay.

Bertram and Stephen had both been forced away from his side in the press, or their watchful eyes could scarcely have failed to note such a disaster ; and the young

squire, who was the only one of his personal attendants closely following him, had met his death but a few moments before.

Thus it was that when the Baron opened his eyes to full consciousness a few moments after his fall, he found himself entirely alone, excepting that four or five figures lay stretched helplessly upon the ground around him. He knew well from his own consciousness, without the need of information from without, that he had met his death-blow ; he felt a mortal pain consuming him, and knew that the life-blood was ebbing slowly from his veins. Calmly he accepted the knowledge, and lay for a time in perfect stillness, not caring to turn his head to see if any were beside him, with his eyes directed towards the golden sunset, and the same feeling strong upon him which has come to so many more, that somewhere beyond those clouds lay the regions of that other world, to which he was hastening. He did not fear death—had it not always been his expectation, nay, his desire, to meet it in some such form as this ? And yet, as he looked, a kind of awe crept over him. He wished he might have had a priest beside him then, to receive his last breath, listen to his last words, and speak encouragement to him in return. Would not the souls of the dead be better received in the new world he was approaching if they entered it fortified by the blessing of the Church ? He thought he had been told so ; but this spiritual aid was beyond his reach. Well, he would not die like a heathen, at least ; and the Baron set himself to repeat a pater-noster in a tone which was indeed low, but as clear and steady as it had ever been.

Then he let his mind wander over the years of his past life. Yes, it had been a happy, a fortunate one, but for the shadow which had darkened his best days—the loss of the wife he had loved with more than common devotion. Well, his death had not come upon him too soon, he thought ; he had fairly lived his life, and done his work ; he left a son who would stand in his place. But now a fit of restless longing came upon him—where was Bertram ? He must, he would, see him for the last time

before he died ; and now, for the first time he raised his head a little, and tried to look round for any friendly face that might chance to be near him. He saw none, however, but hearing a slight moan and movement from a man who lay at a little distance, he bent his eyes upon him, and recognised the form and countenance of the Count Fitz Gournay.

It was a strange situation, the assassin and his victim, lying side by side, without power to leave each other's company, to spend alone together what might be the last moments of life. The eyes of the Count met the Baron's steady gaze ; and for a few instants they regarded each other in total silence, the former sustaining that stern, denouncing look with a kind of fierce sullenness, though he visibly chafed under it. At length the Baron spoke :

'The blow was well aimed, Count Fitz Gournay,' he said. 'Think not that I do not know the hand that stretched me here.'

'The hand was mine,' replied the Count, struggling for calmness of utterance ; 'and if the blow have found the heart, it was well aimed, as thou sayest.'

'Do not triumph in the success of thy treason,' said the Baron, with indignation, 'in the very instant of passing to thy account. We are both near the gates of death, and hereafter our cause shall be judged aright.'

'What mean you ?' cried the Count quickly. 'I am not dying ; my wounds are but slight ; I am not near to death. Baron, I will overlive thee twenty years.'

'Well, well,' replied the Baron, 'death comes to us all, and will come to thee, Count Hugo, as surely as to me, even should he tarry twice twenty years upon the road. For me, the chiefest pang in dying lies in this : that I have been stricken down by a hand which in former years I have often grasped in friendship—by the hand of a man bound in close ties of kindred to my dear lost lady—if one so near to heaven can own a kindred with such as thee.'

'There need be no talk of ancient friendship between us,' said the Count, slightly raising himself upon the arm, and directing a sardonic glance to the place where his

kinsman lay ; ' my heart can bear me witness that it has never held much love for you, nor yours for me, I think.'

The Baron turned his eyes away with a sigh, like one who had had enough of this strange colloquy, and remained for some moments in silence, watching the changing colours of the sky ; and as he looked a dark cloud swept over the sunset scene, hiding it from his view. It fretted him, for he was in that weakened state which is liable to be cheered or depressed by the most trifling of external circumstances ; and this sudden darkening of the heavens seemed like the withdrawal of a promise or a welcome. He shivered at the cold breath of the wind as it swept over the hill, and death wore at that moment a gloomier aspect.

The neighbourhood of the Count had disturbed the tranquil current of thought which had filled his mind so short a time before. Presently he looked again towards his brother-in-law, and said gravely :

' Hugo, I do indeed believe that you have ever hated me, though until this day I had thought you not quite barren of the true faith of chivalry. Now, in my last hour, I would fain hear the cause of the malice you have borne me ; for sure am I, as I hope for Heaven's help in my extremity, that I never gave it ground.'

' Are you so sure that you never gave it ground ?' replied the Count, in a slow and bitter tone. ' Baron, I have hated you from the day on which my sister wedded you in my despite, and scorned for your sake him who was my friend. Can you not recall how you overcame me in battle, and led me prisoner to the camp of King Philip as a rebel taken in arms ? Fresh fuel was added to my hatred then. And I hated you with tenfold force upon the day, now two years gone, when you delivered from my hands that wealthy Jew, who would have been to me a rich prize ; because, forsooth, he had done you service. A worthy friend, indeed, for a knight and Christian ! These, Raymond de Drumont, are some of your offences against me, and now they are well repaid.'

' They are repaid,' said the Baron, raising his head as high from the ground as he was able, and looking the

Count firmly in the face, 'by means which have disgraced not our kindred alone, but our common knighthood. Nay, never turn thine eyes away, but gaze on steadily, and thou shalt learn how much happier a thing it is to die in honour, than to live in shame.'

For the next half-hour neither spoke more, and the Baron's thoughts again turned towards Bertram, and his great desire for him. The father began to fear that he could never see his noble son, for he felt that the feebleness was growing fast upon him; and the Baron, tired with watching and waiting, closed his eyes, and gave himself up to the death which he felt now to be fast approaching.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BERTRAM in the meantime was seeking anxiously for his father, whose loss had been long ago perceived; nor would his return have been delayed so long, had not the opposing party met with a sudden addition to their numbers, which had enabled them not only to make a stand against their pursuers, but to surround them in such a manner that the Normans found some difficulty in cutting their way through. The followers of the Baron were half maddened with impatience at this delay occurring just after they had discovered that their lord was no longer with them, and, as soon as they had fought themselves clear of their adversaries, formed into a compact body, and rode back in stern and anxious silence to seek for him, either dead or living, as the event might prove.

Some among them; and his son above all, had something like a feeling of self-reproach that he had been suffered to fall unnoticed, when it might have been that a watchful friend, close to his hand, could have averted danger from him.

'Why,' thought Bertram, as he rode in front exploring with anxious, restless eyes the ground upon either hand—'why had he allowed himself to be divided from his

father? Was it not his place to have stood by his side, and at least receive him falling in his arms?’

Yet he knew well that all their party had been so forcibly scattered abroad in the sudden onset, that it was by no choice of his he had lost that station, which had been his at first. Riding in front with only Stephen, whose anxiety equalled his own, abreast, Bertram hastened their pace all he could; while the eyes of both glanced keenly and watchfully over all the ground they passed, seizing the whole with one look, and with no need to pause and gaze more narrowly. Each absorbed within himself, they went on without speaking for a little while; till Bertram, suddenly turning his head, looked at Stephen riding by his side, and saw, what no one had ever seen before, that great drops were falling from his eyes, and down his hard and weather-beaten face.

A fresh alarm seized upon Bertram when he saw it; for underlying his disquietude there had been a confidence that all would be well, and that no misfortune so great could befall him. But now he felt a sudden fear, as a child might on seeing its guide start from a danger it had scarcely dreaded before, trusting in his protection, and he cried impetuously:

‘Stephen, dost thou weep for my father as lost already? We are as like to find him living as dead, and I at least will not mourn for him before the time. Let us put a stout heart upon it; I never saw thee weep before.’

‘I never had like cause, perhaps,’ said Stephen, looking up to Bertram’s face, which held the vague terror he would not put in words. ‘I shall never see my lord in life again; I cannot tell how I know it, but sure I am of that. You are young, my lord, and hope easily.’

‘My hopes shall foretell more surely than thy despondency,’ said Bertram, glad to talk down his fears; but as he spoke Stephen grasped his arm, and, pointing forward, cried:

‘See yonder; there he lies!’

In a moment they had dismounted and bent over the wounded Baron, their example being followed by all who rode behind.

'Oh, my dear lord !' exclaimed Stephen as he knelt on the ground and supported the Baron's head upon his breast ; his experienced eyes saw clearly that life was fast ebbing away.

Bertram kneeled down by the side of his father, who smiled faintly upon him, and made an effort to raise his hand, which rested for a moment on the young man's head.

'Bertram,' he murmured, 'you are come at last ; I wearied for you, boy. I am dying, slain by treason—the Count, your uncle ; he lies yonder. Dear son, you will succeed me worthily.'

Bertram bent over the dying man with his frame shaken by sobs, and made no answer, unless it were to clasp and kiss his father's hand. Stephen still sat at the head immovable ; it was a post he would have yielded to no one. Who could have a better right than he, who had loved and served this man for forty years as few are ever served ? None had ever come before the Baron in the heart of this faithful follower—the love that other men spend upon wife and child, glory and ambition, all was lavished upon his lord. Had they not played together in childhood, and fought together in their prime ? Now, in the Baron's last hour, this deep affection broke down all barriers of reverence or distance in Stephen's mind ; and he almost experienced a feeling of jealousy, to think that anyone, even if it were a son, should stand closer than himself to the lord he idolized. Their attachment had already been firmly cemented long before that son was born ; and now had the Baron no last words to leave with him ? As Stephen sat and thought of these things, the tears from his eyes fell fast upon the uncovered forehead of his dying master, and seemed to rouse him from the quiet into which he had fallen after the last words. He tried to lift his hand again to grasp that of Stephen ; and strove with great difficulty to speak, while the old squire bent low over him to catch the words.

'Stephen,' he muttered, 'Stephen——' but strength was now deserting him so rapidly that he could add no more ; he could only answer the despairing eyes fixed upon him

by a faint smile, and lie quiet, seeming fully content now that friends were around him.

The remainder of the Baron's followers stood at a little distance, with sad and downcast faces. They, too, had loved him; if with less than Stephen's ardent devotion, still well and faithfully, as they had good cause to do; for the Baron de Drumont had been to his retainers so gracious and kindly a lord as they knew well they could have found few to equal. To them it seemed a long time, that they stood watching the silent group before them after the last words were said; but it was not in reality more than ten minutes before Stephen reverently closed the eyes of the dead; and Bertram, springing to his feet, began to pace the ground with hasty strides, while the old retainer still kept his former position. Now, that they no longer were withheld by the fear of disturbing the last moments of their lord, the little troop of retainers pressed more closely around his body; and stood looking on him with occasional gesticulations of sorrow or of loyal tribute to his memory. Some stooped to kiss his hand in farewell; but Stephen sat in silence and noticed none of them.

Bertram, in the meantime, wandered to and fro with the restlessness of grief. After passing the spot more than once, he stood still at last directly before the place where the Count Fitz Gournay yet lay unattended; for his followers, who were seeking for him, had not yet come up. Hearing a deep groan, Bertram cast his eyes downward; and when he recognised his uncle in the prostrate figure before him, the remembrance of the last words spoken by his father came to his mind; and he stood for a few moments gazing upon the Count with a dark expression overclouding his countenance, for he knew that he was in the presence of the slayer of his father.

At length observing, from the uneasy motions and contorted features of Count Hugo, that he suffered considerable pain, Bertram knelt down, still with the same fixed and stern expression, to examine his hurts, a position in which he remained for a short time in perfect silence;

neither did the Count make any attempt to address him, though there was a look of apparent recognition in his eyes. Having satisfied himself of the nature of the injuries, Bertram strode back to the group assembled round the lifeless form of the Baron ; and, laying a hand on the shoulder of one who stood within the circle, desired him in a low tone to accompany him, and strive to afford some relief to the Count Fitz Gournay. At the sound of this name, Stephen for the first time looked up, and said, with a hard, stern tone in his voice :

‘Has not my dear lord told us with his last breath that he fell by a treacherous stroke from the hand of this count, whom you, my lord, are so ready to succour? Leave him to die the same death upon the same ground. I had not thought my heart could have been so much rejoiced in this hour as in thinking of it.’

‘He will not die,’ replied Bertram, in a dull, mechanical tone, and keeping his eyes fixed upon the ground. ‘Stephen there is small cause to recall to me my father’s words ; but the time to remember them is hereafter, not now.’

‘The time is hereafter, and now, and every moment in which you draw breath,’ replied Stephen, with fierce energy, as he bent his brows into a dark, reproachful look towards his young lord. ‘Can your memory be lulled to sleep so soon?’

‘Peace!’ said Bertram, a little roughly, while his features seemed drawn by some inward emotion ; ‘I will not be hindered from my will. The honour of that knighthood which I took but yesterday forbids me to visit my resentment on a wounded man. I will not tell thee that he is of my blood, for that tie is broken—I say only that he is helpless. Wait, Stephen, till some future day, which shall prove that my memory can be as good as thine.’

Bertram turned away as he spoke, with a peremptory gesture addressed to the man he had singled out to follow him, because he had acquired some repute among his fellows, for a certain rude skill in surgery, which he possessed. The signal was obeyed, both by him and two or three others, who slowly followed after Bertram’s hasty

footsteps ; while Stephen let his head fall upon his breast, and murmured rather bitterly :

‘ Well, well ; but the son can soon forget the father’s wrongs.’

Bertram stood upright, with folded arms, watching the efforts which his companions were making, under his direction, for the relief and safety of the Count. He believed, as Count Hugo himself had done, that the wounds were slight, and quite unlikely to have a fatal termination ; but, in thinking so, he made no account of the former course of life led by his uncle—of which, indeed, he was almost entirely ignorant—or of the effect it was likely to produce on the prospects of his recovery.

The Count Fitz Gournay was by no means an old man ; but the life of reckless pleasure and passion, which he had led in his youth, had early undermined his constitution ; and, though the course of his later years had been more restrained, he had neglected to invigorate his frame by constant practice of those manly and hardy exercises, which the custom of the day had almost rendered universal. Now, therefore, the forces of his life proved unequal to the strain put upon them by injuries which were, in reality, more serious than they at first appeared ; and, contrary to Bertram’s expectation, he seemed to decline rapidly under the rough attempts at succour now offered to him.

The Count received the well-meant services in perfect silence ; and though they must have increased the pain he was already enduring, noticed it only by one glance of surprise, when first he was called upon to submit to the handling of the retainers of the Baron. His eyes were fixed constantly upon the face of his nephew, who returned the gaze with a firm and steady look, which was not withdrawn until the Count, unable to penetrate either his knowledge or his purpose, suffered his glances to wander wildly all around him ; and gave himself up to the last struggle with that death, which he was not yet willing to believe close at hand.

His countenance became much convulsed as the final moment approached ; in place of a tranquil readiness, such

as had been apparent in the Baron's bearing at this time, he appeared like one engaged in an actual physical struggle with the force, which was tearing away his life. At length, after a last silent glance of despair at the world he was forced to leave, he sank into utter exhaustion, and closed his eyes, never to open them again.

The man, who had hitherto supported his head, sprang instantly to his feet; almost allowing it to fall upon the ground in the abruptness of the movement.

'Dead, my lord,' he said shortly, and with a ring of satisfaction in his tone.

'That task, then, is ended,' said Bertram, turning quickly away, and walking again towards the place where the Baron lay. Here he again kneeled down by the side of his father, taking his heavy hand and caressing it as tenderly as a living thing; and gazing long and earnestly into his face, as though he sought to revive the gentler sentiments of grief, which had for a short time been somewhat superseded by other feelings.

Bertram had, indeed, good cause to mourn with depth and sincerity for such a father as he had lost; for the Baron, in the midst of a stern and rugged age, had so doted upon this only child, who had once been the sole pride and object of his life, the one memory of the wife he daily regretted, that Bertram had never known from him anything but fatherly care and indulgence. It was no wonder, then, that the young Baron of but an hour since should regard this elevation as the most heavy misfortune that could have fallen upon him; the only great misfortune which had yet darkened his life.

Bertram was thinking thus, as he again walked to and fro in a more deserted spot, where the stillness was accordant with his mood; but whence he could still see the men crowded around the dead body of the Baron; and presently a group of the followers of the Count Fitz Gournay, who had now discovered his corpse, and were bearing it away among them. Bertram, however, buried in his own meditations, scarcely observed them; and was too little schooled in the necessity of subduing his thoughts, to meet the exigencies of a trying occasion,

to heed anything beyond, though it was now almost dark, and the rain had begun to fall. At length he was approached by one of the squires of the Baron, who addressed him with deference, yet with a plain directness of speech.

‘My lord, you cannot think it meet that your noble father’s body should be suffered to lie longer, exposed to the elements, on this waste hill. Would it not be well rather to move forward and join the main force, which we should have reached long since? This place would be a perilous one, too, for night quarters, and we have lingered here too long already; but I ever thought you would rouse your mind to direct us. Recollect, my lord, that it is to you we have now to look.’

‘Yes,’ answered Bertram, with a start, ‘you do well to remind me of it. Let us leave this spot at once. Where is Stephen?’

‘Alas, my lord, you must not lean upon him now,’ was the grave reply; ‘he has fallen, as it seems to me, into a kind of muse or daze, from which he may never wake again the man he was. He will not speak to us, but sits still as a stone, holding the head of my dear lord in his arms; and heeds neither darkness, rain, nor lapse of time. Well, he deeply loved him, as all might see before, but never so plain as now.’

Bertram answered only by a sigh; and, as they reached the group towards which they had been walking, gave prompt orders that his father’s body should be taken up, and the men form in order to follow him towards the camp, for which they had been bound earlier in the day. Glad to be again employed, and to feel that they again had a head, the retainers obeyed his commands with such alacrity, that all was soon arranged.

Stephen showed at first some reluctance, when disturbed from the lethargy by which he had suffered himself to be overcome; but seeming at last to comprehend the necessity of the movement he would never have made unprompted, shook off some portion of that leaden weight; and, resuming something of his old vigour, acceded to the arrangements made for their march.

The slow and melancholy ride was performed in almost total silence, and in the midst of rain and a low sobbing wind, which seemed in sympathy with the gloomy travellers. The light of the moon, not quite obscured by clouds, served to show their path, but with a dim unearthly light that harmonized well with Bertram's awed feeling of something strange, and supernatural, having passed him close. Stephen still moved like one not well awake ; and could scarcely bestow the needful attention even on the guidance of his horse, which stumbled once or twice without his heeding it. Some of those who went behind occasionally spoke together in low tones ; but their talk was of the Baron ; and the scattered words soon died away into long pauses, broken only at the end by short low phrases, which served only to show how deep was the general silence.

When at last, however, their journey was accomplished, and Bertram was able to throw himself down to rest, he slept long and profoundly ; as did all those who came with him, after sharing in the toils and emotions of that eventful day.

CHAPTER XIX.

It was but a day or two after his father's death, that Bertram, with all his troop, set his face homewards on a frosty autumn morning, carrying the body of the Baron for interment among his ancestors. The war was now so near its close, that Bertram found no difficulty in absenting himself from it ; and was impatient to return to Normandy as speedily as possible. But it was a long and tedious journey, rendered trying also by the cold which had suddenly set in with a severity not common so early in the season. Bertram, indeed, seemed as insensible to the influence of the freezing climate, as did the silent and stricken Stephen, who rode passively at his side, heeding nothing in his desire to press quickly forward ; but the men muttered some complaints among themselves, of the

hardships they underwent in the march—complaints which might have been echoed with more justice by the horses they rode, on whom, as always in such cases, the chief burden of endurance fell.

The younger members of the company began in a short time to cast aside something of the solemn and regretful feelings which had weighted their spirits; and a little of the old careless cheerfulness again displayed itself among them; though vented only in carefully suppressed tones, lest the thoughtful humour of their new lord should be disturbed by any ill-timed mirth.

Their older companions, however—men whose heads had grown gray under the leadership of the old Baron—still retained their saddened looks and gloomy bearing; for the balance of their life had undergone too rough a shock to be readjusted soon. The Baron had been for years to them the centre of existence, on whom they had depended so absolutely that it now seemed as though the sun had shot suddenly from their sphere, leaving the world dark and purposeless. Bertram was, indeed, well loved by them all; but the child they had held upon their knees could never fill up to them the place of the lord they had lost. The youths, upon the other hand, bound less strongly to the Baron, and drawn by a natural attraction to the younger, would be less hard to reconcile to the change that had fallen upon them; and already began to beguile the way with speculations as to the alterations which were likely to creep into the usages and government of the castle; for they were fully acquainted with the force of the saying ‘that new lords make new laws.’

‘How, think you,’ said one man confidentially to his companion—‘how, think you, that it will go now with this marriage, which we were to have witnessed directly upon our return? Will my lord be now ready to give effect to his father’s intent in that matter? I have sometimes had misgivings that we may miss our spectacle.’

‘Why should he not?’ returned the other in surprise. ‘How should the life or death of our Baron loosen the ties which bind him to the Lady Claudine? And, by my

head, they are gentle bonds enough, such as few would wish to break asunder! Is she not young and fair—ay, and as sweet a lady as ever ruled in our castle yet? and wouldst thou make my lord a fool?’

‘But see now,’ resumed the first speaker musingly, ‘it is not every lady who draws all by her charms alike; and it has seemed to me at times as if my lord did not look so lovingly upon her, to whom his father’s will alone contracted him.’

‘Truly, has it seemed so,’ rejoined his companion, with a rather mocking laugh. ‘And how long is it, I pray, since my lord has chosen thee for the honour of his most secret confidences?’

‘Yes, yes,’ retorted the young man, ‘laugh at me as long as thou wilt; but, for all that, the son’s desires do not always run in the same course as his father’s: and we may find that thou canst speak no more surely than I upon my lord’s inmost wishes. Why, in the fiend’s name, do we halt here so long? I am freezing to the ground already, and I think if we move not forward soon we shall all be turned to blocks of ice, and stand fixed to this spot for ever after; as chanced to a woman that the priest told me of one day, who looked back from the way she was going and was changed to a pillar of stone.’

‘It will soon grow dark, too,’ answered the other. ‘We should have stayed at that last town we passed through; but my lord is ever in such haste to press forward. It is as though an army of fiends were behind to drive him on! So, we are in motion again now, and we had need, if we are to find the shelter of an inn before nightfall.’

It was, indeed, beginning to grow dusk, and Bertram thought he had perhaps been imprudent in persisting in the pursuit of his journey. The tract which they were now crossing was solitary and desolate, skirted, too, upon one side by dark woods. The men began to whisper together about wolves—a danger far from imaginary at that season, as he was well aware, and could almost fancy that he heard their bay in the distance, or saw the glitter of their many eyes among the trees. Nothing was seen or heard, however, to justify these fears; and soon the

conversation, changing its tone, fell upon ghostly apparitions, witches, demons, and other nightly horrors, which were favoured by the aspect of the place through which they passed. The dark fir-trees looked like giant shapes crouching silently in the dim light; and often a bush covered with hoar-frost appeared to resemble a ghostly form risen from the ground before them. One man swore stoutly that he had been told the place was of ill-repute, and the constant resort of evil spirits: and though some threw scorn upon the notion that such visitants were to be looked for so long before the hour of midnight, others contended that ghosts and spirits began to walk as soon as twilight fell, and pursued their unearthly gambols the whole night through.

Thus, half in awed belief, and in part for the sake of exciting terror in some few who were more than commonly sensitive upon such subjects, the men fell to relating tales of horror or of wonder, which struck a chill to some young hearts, and were, perhaps, rendered more effective by the unwelcome recollection that they bore a corpse in their company.

Bertram caught from time to time some fragments of their talk, but though by no means insensible in general to these dread mysteries, they could not now accelerate his pulses in the least degree; for there are times when the unseen world appears so near and intimate that supernatural terrors lose almost all their force. If in this moment the spirit of his father had stood suddenly in his path, he felt as though he could have confronted it without alarm. The toils and hardships of the journey were not sufficient to arouse him to a full sense of the common life in which he moved; and he had gone through that day like one who walks in sleep. More than half his heart seemed to have followed the father, whose loss he no longer so deeply mourned, because he did not feel him now to be far divided.

When they halted at an inn at night, he threw himself down, with scarcely the delay of an hour, upon any couch the place afforded; to enjoy till morning that profound repose, which can come only to a fatigued body and an

exhausted mind. At daybreak he was again in the saddle, and pursuing his long ride with thoughts so abstracted that he scarcely knew when a milder air had banished the bitter frost, until his impatient spirit was aroused by finding, upon the brink of a river which he must pass, that the ice was now so thin and broken as to forbid a passage, and that they must ride round by a longer way.

When at length, however, they had reached the immediate neighbourhood of the castle, and were travelling through ways where all felt themselves already at home, Bertram appeared to awake, as from a stupor, and the familiar scenes around him revived a sense of loss more bitter than he had yet experienced. As he rode by the woods which, under the reign of the Baron, had so often been filled with the cheerful shouts of hunters through a long summer day ; and stood upon the hill on which he had seen his father turn to look back for the last time ; above all, when his eyes fell upon the castle itself and all its surroundings, which the Baron had seemed to fill with his presence, Bertram bent his head over his horse's neck, and wrestled blindly with a feeling of utter desolation. At last he looked no more ; but fixed his gaze upon the ground until, with his dejected and wearied company, he stood before the gates of the castle, now his alone. The journey he had pursued so impatiently had come to its close, but had brought him no nearer content.

CHAPTER XX.

THE evening was about to give place to night, when Bertram and his followers entered the castle court, where those who were ready to meet them there pressed around them eagerly, and would have given vent to their pleasure in noisy acclamations, but that Bertram, by an authoritative gesture, imposed silence ; and when they saw the saddened faces of the new-comers, and missed the Baron from among them, all soon comprehended that it was not an hour for congratulation.

Bertram dismounted so hastily as scarcely to afford time for anyone to come to his assistance; and demanding only of those who stood nearest, 'Where is your lady?' received for answer that she was in the great hall, and with her——; but he waited to hear no more, and immediately turned to go thither, impatiently waving back one or two who would have followed him.

'Leave me to myself; I want none of you. See to it only that the body of my father is straightway carried to the chapel, and left ready for interment there.'

Bertram stood for a moment on the threshold of the hall, and looked within before advancing further. His arrival had been attended with so little noise, and each person had been so reluctant to become the messenger of evil tidings, that the inmates of this apartment had not been disturbed by any confusion—the less so as their attention appeared to be much engaged.

Claudine, standing in the middle of the floor, was casting proud yet tearful glances of defiance upon Gaston de Drumont, who stood at a little distance, endeavouring, with great apparent earnestness, to induce her to hear some explanation or defence of the circumstance, which seemed to have moved her. The two women, who were the only other persons present, looked on with rather frightened eyes, and had moved close up behind their mistress, as though to defend her, where they stood regarding the knight silently. Bertram paused in sheer astonishment, and heard the words that Claudine was pouring forth.

'It is not worthy of a gentleman—it is not worthy of a knight, to use such words to me. You are dishonouring me—you are dishonouring your uncle, under whose roof we are, when you speak to me so. If I had thought you would do so, I would not——'

Here she broke down and cried.

With three steps Bertram was within the doorway, and stood before Sir Gaston, regarding him sternly and steadily.

'Cousin,' he said, in a clear and serious tone, 'what do you here?'

‘Cousin!’ exclaimed Sir Gaston, starting back in some confusion; ‘returned already, and so quietly; we heard no sound, no shouts, no trampling, no sign of your approach.’

‘I can well believe,’ replied Bertram, struggling to subdue his rising passion into calmness, ‘that you would fain have had some signal of it, Sir Gaston. Tell me, Claudine,’ he went on, gently taking her hand; ‘tell me, if he will not, what is it that he has said to thee—what has he done? Have no more fear of him now that I am here.’

‘I never fear anything when you are here,’ said Claudine, clinging to his arm with absolute confidence. ‘Oh, Bertram, how did you come just as I most needed you? I am not afraid now. But I did not fear him,’ she added, drawing up her head with a little gesture of haughtiness; ‘he would not have dared to harm me; or, no, he meant not that either—he would not hurt me, but he said things that he should not. He will talk to me of love, Bertram—*his* love, and tells me that our contract, made as children, may go for nothing if I will have it so; and presses me hard to say that I will take *him* for my knight and my lord hereafter, if by all the efforts we can make that union may be broken.’

‘Come, dry thy tears,’ said Bertram kindly; ‘he shall not speak of love to thee again. Pray you, Sir Gaston, step with me into that window-niche; I have more to say to you than I would have her hear.’

Claudine held his hand, as though she would have withheld him; but he released it with more abruptness than he had ever displayed towards her, saying:

‘Why dost thou keep me, child? I can choose my own path, and will follow it.’

‘Sir Gaston,’ said Bertram, as the two moved apart together, speaking in tones of great energy; ‘you have done me foul wrong. Is it here, beneath this roof, that you would strive by insidious art to turn from me the heart of my plighted bride—nay, half my wife already? Yourself was present when her dying father gave her to my father’s charge, that he might shield her from shadow

of harm or reproach. Had you no thought for the honour of our name ?

‘My kind cousin,’ replied the other, with no loss of his wonted self-possession, ‘I entreat you to look on the matter with something less of seriousness. I have but sought to cheer the lonely hours of a fair lady, left somewhat desolate here during your long absence. And, by my faith ! until to-day she seemed not ill pleased that I should so entertain her ; and if some words of warmer colour have been passed during our converse, why, it was but pleasant pastime, which, now you are returned again, remains pastime and nothing more. Do not fear, cousin, that I have any wish to strive with you in earnest in such a field. There, let us leave it, and tell me all that has befallen you since we met. You return at least, I see, a knight. But came not my uncle with you ?’

‘Then, by that same knighthood which I won so lately,’ stormed Bertram, giving free vent to the anger and contempt which had been struggling within him ; ‘you shall strive with me in another field. What ! do you talk to me of pastime ? Had you told me that you loved her, that your mind was warped by tyrant passion, I might have held you for a man at least ; but now—— I will waste no more words. You have done the deed of a dastard ;’ and Bertram as he ceased, threw his glove, with a gesture of contempt, at his cousin’s feet.

Sir Gaston stooped and took it up, and stood holding it in his hand, while he answered coldly, but with more gravity than before :

‘If you will have it so, it is not I who will deny you. I will meet you when you please.’

Bertram paused for an instant, and replied :

‘I bring with me to-day the yet unburied remains of my father. I will not meet you or any man, nor engage in any other undertaking, before I have seen him laid in consecrated earth.’

‘Ha ! indeed,’ interrupted Sir Gaston ; ‘my uncle dead ? And what was the manner of his death ? Did he fall in battle ?’

‘He fell in battle, sir, and he fell by murder,’ said

Bertram coldly. 'He found that the hand of a brother, may deal as deadly a blow as the dagger of an enemy! Had he escaped that peril he might have found he had a nephew, too. If you can meet me to-morrow, two hours after noon, I will await you on the verge of the forest where my father loved to hunt. You know the spot I mean—it is where there flows the little brook which runs and swells into our river here, just on the boundaries.'

'I know the place,' replied Sir Gaston, 'and I will not fail you.'

Then he bowed low, with something of an ironical air, and left the room, and shortly afterwards the castle.

'Bertram,' said Claudine, lifting up a rather anxious face; 'what was it you talked of with him there?'

'Do not think of it,' answered he. 'Come and sit by me here, and let us forget him in this first hour of our meeting. I have much to tell thee of.'

He sat down by her side, and told her plainly but gently of the loss which she, as well as he, had sustained in the Baron's fall. Then, appearing to be unnerved by her distress—for he was fatigued and excited, and in need of food and sleep—he sent one of her attendants in quest of Margery; who took the girl under her motherly care, and gently soothed her frightened, weeping charge; persuading her soon to come with her into an inner chamber, where they might be alone.

Bertram remained without motion, gazing vacantly at the great fire that roared upon the hearth. Now that there was no longer any imperative need for action, the energy to act seemed to have left him altogether; and he sat almost like a stupefied man. Meanwhile, by twos and threes, the different members of the household flocked into the hall, and gathered together at the lower end, whispering together and often looking towards Bertram, but no one ventured to approach him, till at last a squire stepped up to the table, which was covered with meat and wine, and taking a flagon, carried it to his lord, and silently put it in his hand. Bertram drank, and the attendant said, as he received the cup again:

'My lord, you must eat; men do not live on shadows.'

‘I thought myself too wearied,’ said Bertram, ‘and could have sat here without stirring till daydawn ; but now, yes, I will eat.’ He went to the table, but as soon as the meal was done, returned to his old station before the fire ; and the same young man coming to him again at the end of a short time, found him in a sound sleep.

‘My lord, my lord,’ he said, arousing him ; ‘this must not be. Let me only attend you to your couch, where sleep may be undisturbed.’

Bertram rose and went with him, and soon all the cares which weighed upon his mind were sunk in complete oblivion.

The winter sun was already high, upon the following morning, before the inmates of the castle were gathered together in the chapel, for the last tribute to the memory of their old Baron. Claudine stood by Bertram’s side in the front rank of those present ; and watched the body laid in its grave, with her eyes full of that half-terrified wonder, which is the first impression the very young can receive of death ; and half unconsciously she held by Bertram’s hand as she listened. The rather tedious ceremonial, and long Latin prayers, afforded ample space for the thoughts of either to wander at will ; and those of Bertram, however earnestly he strove to fix them, could not be entirely confined to the solemn scene now passing around him. The memory of the hostile encounter with his cousin, to which he was pledged for that day, would from time to time occupy his mind : and interfere with the reflections, which he felt to be better fitted for the hour. He bent his eyes steadily on the vested priests as they stood beside the grave, through the whole course of their praying and chanting ; but it was not until he saw the coffin of his father covered from sight, that he regained his former sense of absorption. The various retainers who filled the little chapel, almost beyond its capacity, stood in absolute stillness, and with the appearance of reverent attention, their eyes fixed upon the fantastic fretted pattern cast by the chill sunbeams upon the floor ; and it seemed as though they really found some hidden meaning in the incompre-

hensible words droned monotonously forth by voices, which had chanted them so many times, that they had become dead and meaningless even to the singers. There were tears in the eyes of more than one rough warrior, who might have looked unmoved upon the burial of any other than his head, his Baron, in whom the lives of all had seemed bound up. The glances of Bertram and of many others there fell often upon the figure of Stephen, who stood as close as he could find space to the foot of the grave, looking a little less tall than usual ; for his head was sunk upon his breast, and his whole frame relaxed from its usual uprightness. Bertram had hoped that the scene he had now to look upon, might have some power to rouse the old man from his apathy ; but Stephen stood throughout the whole ceremony apparently unmoved : and when it was over, slipped instantly away to some solitary place. Yet a page of the castle whispered afterwards, among his companions, that he had seen the old squire come secretly back, after the chapel was deserted, and sit quietly beside the grave for an hour.

The funeral was concluded, the priests laid aside their sacred vestments, and prepared to quit the castle. One or two, as they passed the place where Bertram stood, addressed to him a few words of kindness, to which he silently bent his head in answer. All now flocked out of the chapel together, and as Bertram mingled among the rest, he heard one man remark to his mate :

‘William, there were eight Barons laid here before, but not one who was worthy to hold the stirrup to him who has joined them to-day. It is many a year since I have ever prayed in my own behalf, yet now will I take a solemn vow to repeat aves every day for the repose of his soul.’

CHAPTER XXI.

As the time drew near when Bertram must keep the appointment of the previous night, he ordered his horse to be brought to him ; and accompanied by a single squire

only, proceeded to that spot upon the borders of the forest, which had been agreed on as the place of meeting. He rode briskly, anxious not to be the last upon the ground ; but on reaching it, his opponent was nowhere to be seen, and for many minutes he was obliged to await his coming, and paced his horse to and fro beneath the bare trees, singing softly to himself some fragments from the psalms, to which he had been listening a short time before, and which had impressed themselves strangely on his memory.

At length his impatience began to rise, and he looked many times in the direction from which he expected his cousin's approach, muttering :

'Saints and demons ! why does he tarry so long ? I would I were well over with this business. It is one thing to contend with the enemies of king and country, and another with one's own flesh and blood. I think if he had been one half as eager to begin the fray as I am, he would have been here long ere now.'

Sir Gaston was punctual, notwithstanding, to the appointed time, which Bertram's impatience had led him to anticipate ; and came smiling to the contest, as though a deadly struggle with the son of the uncle, who had bred him up, seemed to him as natural and indifferent a thing, as any mimic trial of strength or tourney play. Of the issue he had not many doubts ; for his antagonist was so many years beneath him in age, that the old feeling of superiority this circumstance engendered, still lingered in his mind ; and he would have found it hard to believe that his young kinsman could yet be his equal in any manly exercises.

After the arrival of Sir Gaston, very little time was spent in parley, and scarcely five words were exchanged, before the two knights stood opposite to each other, prepared for the charge. Bertram thought he saw on the countenance of his cousin a slightly mocking expression, which he interpreted into a contempt for his prowess, that angered him ; and he dashed forward with a very good will, to meet his antagonist in a furious shock, which cast both in the same moment to the ground. Two or

three seconds, however, had not passed before both had sprung up unhurt, and prepared to measure their strength in another and a longer contest.

As they faced each other, sword in hand, pausing for an instant before the engagement, the glow of earnestness in the one face, formed a curious contrast to the light and careless expression displayed on the countenance of the other. They soon, however, started from this momentary trance, and commenced a struggle, which was watched by the young squire, who had attended Bertram thither, with feelings of some little anxiety; for he looked upon it as scarcely an equal one, and apprehended that Bertram might prove unable to hold his ground, against an antagonist so much his superior in years, and, as it might be presumed, in practice also.

It certainly appeared, after the first blows were struck, that Sir Gaston held his opponent at considerable advantage, for both in physical power and coolness of temper, his superiority over his cousin was plainly observable; but, as the contest proceeded, the spectators were soon able to perceive that he had by no means so perfect a skill in the use of his weapon as Bertram, by constant practice, had attained. The struggle, therefore, between two combatants, who were more nearly matched than had at first appeared, was both a long and doubtful one. Sir Gaston did, indeed, succeed in forcing Bertram down upon his knee early in its course, but he regained his feet almost immediately, and seemed to lose with every stroke some portion of that fiery excitement, which had perilled his success before.

The youth, who had attended him from the castle, felt his spirits rise and sink at every instant as he watched, and reflected on the chances that the unwelcome task might await him of bearing back to the castle, already plunged into mourning, the tidings of a new and more terrible disaster still; which would bring with it not grief for the past alone, but also despair for the future. Indeed, he dared not even contemplate the event of the only son of his late lord falling thus early in a private quarrel; and falling like his father, by the hand of a near

kinsman. But as he saw Bertram still grow more strong and steady, as the confidence and coolness of Sir Gaston began in some measure to desert him, his hopes rose higher ; and, looking up, he saw a sudden gleam of sunshine fall upon the head of the younger knight ; which, to an imagination filled with the fanciful superstitions drawn from romance, showed like a promise of victory. When, at last, he saw Sir Gaston fairly thrown to earth, and completely disabled by a sharp wound in the arm for any further fighting, it was with difficulty that the youth could restrain a loud shout of triumph, on seeing his misgivings thus happily belied.

Bertram stood for a moment looking gravely down upon his prostrate kinsman, who returned the gaze with one in which wounded pride, and the first sharp pangs of pain, were tempered with some degree of respect, and even a species of appeal, which struck kindly upon his cousin's heart. Without speaking, Sir Gaston lifted the sword in his left hand and offered the hilt to Bertram, who received it in equal silence, and gave his hand to assist him to rise. Then he handed back the weapon to his cousin, who said, with a look in which various emotions were strangely blended :

‘ Upon my faith, cousin, I had not thought to find you so skilled a swordsman. Had your strength but equalled mine, you would have overthrown me long before.’

Bertram bowed gravely for all answer to this compliment, but looked at him with a glance more expressive of cordiality than any he had cast upon him before ; then, turning away, he left Sir Gaston in the hands of three or four attendants, who had by this time pressed around him.

‘ Oh ! my lord,’ exclaimed the young squire, as he brought to Bertram the horse which he had captured in its first alarm, ‘ I had so great fears for your safety. Heaven be praised that you are here in life and unharmed.’

‘ You misdoubted me, then,’ said Bertram, laughing, and laying a hand on his shoulder ; ‘ *you* misdoubted me as he did. Did you mark his eye ? He took no more

account of me than if I had been a tender page, who never before had a sword in his fist.'

'He had, indeed, something of that air,' replied the young man; 'but I am truly glad you have now shown him that he has no cause to mock at you.'

'And I rejoice, too, Eustace,' said Bertram, 'that his life has not been taken either in this fray; for, however he may have wronged me, I would not willingly have the blood of my cousin rest upon my steel.'

His satisfaction in this reflection, combined with a little natural triumph, in the issue of this, the first single combat in which he had ever been engaged; as well as the invigorating exercise he had taken, caused Bertram's spirits to rise high above the depressed condition into which they had lately sunk; and he conversed, and even laughed freely, as he had not done since his father's death. All saw with pleasure his brightened face, and altered manner, upon his return; and as he sat at supper he talked and jested, as though all the burdens of care were, for that hour, at least, lifted from his mind.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN the days that followed, Stephen seemed only to sink deeper day by day into the despondency which overwhelmed him, and nothing which passed around seemed able to arouse him from it even for an hour. Bertram, who loved him well, strove in vain to dissipate his melancholy by all the attentions in his power to bestow; and would talk to him with a gentle cheerfulness which, nevertheless, failed to impart any portion of his own more elastic spirit. Stephen would, indeed, glance up with a momentary brightness in his eyes when he heard his voice, and seemed to pay a more ready attention to the words which came from him than to those of any other; but in a few moments fell back into the same dull apathy, which had been upon him almost from the moment of the Baron's death.

Now and then when he heard the stir and bustle of exercise pervade the castle, he would rise from his seat, as though drawn by sounds so familiar to come forward, and resume the place he had once held ; but with a sigh, as though of reawakened remembrance, would sink back listlessly into the chimney-corner ; where he now sat speechless and almost motionless for hours, and even days, together. All interest in the affairs of the world seemed to have deserted him as completely as though some link which alone bound him to life had snapped suddenly, as indeed it had ; and there was something so mournful in the sight of the gray head, bent hopelessly over the fire from hour to hour, that tears stood in the eyes of many who looked upon him now, and remembered the man as he had been. Bertram saw that the old man's heart was broken by the blow he had sustained ; and resigned at last, with deep regret, all hope of ever again seeing him restored to his former self. It was, indeed, true that Stephen's mind would never rally from such a shock, which had torn from him, so suddenly, the support round which all the affections and dependence of his mind had clung so long, that when the one fell, the other could not stand alone. He had lost the spring and purpose of his life ; and, though he should live for twenty years, his heart was none the less broken, because it had not ceased to beat at once.

Bertram was surprised and perplexed by the sudden and rapid change which had been wrought in him, for he could scarcely understand the depth of the old man's devotion to his father ; and, indeed, even the Baron himself, great as his regard had been for this faithful retainer, was perhaps incapable of appreciating, at its full value, that ardent and self-forgetful affection, which had clung to him in good and evil, danger and trial, through his whole life. The mind of one whose affections had been divided among so many more varied interests, and who had been accustomed to consider his own affairs matters of no mean importance, was quite unable to comprehend a self-surrender so absolute.

It had occurred to Bertram that the gentle consolations

and careful tendance of a woman, might be of more service, in reviving this drooping spirit, than any other could be ; and that Claudine's hand and voice were the fittest to sustain the old man in such a case. He told her this, and begged her to assist them as far as she could in a work of charity, which seemed so well suited to occupy the mind of a girl. To his surprise she seemed reluctant to carry out his wishes, and answered with the childish waywardness, which again showed itself when her spirits began to return :

'I do not like him, and never stay in his company of my will. He was ever grim and strange, but now twice as much as before.'

'But he is in need of care; and, if thou wilt be our little lady of the castle, it is thy place to tend graciously on all who are sick either in body or mind.'

'Why, that would be more like a nun in her cloister, or some old nurse who thinks of nothing beyond herbs and possets, than befitting a lady,' said Claudine, with a touch of haughtiness, which became her very prettily. 'They told me always, when a child, that after I was grown a lady I should rule all at my pleasure, and follow nothing but my own will ; and it does not please me to think of things like these. I can leave them all to good old Margery, who can tend the sick to more purpose than I.'

'That is not well, Claudine,' said Bertram, looking grave ; 'and they were no good teachers who told you so. In what rank, think you, I should now be worthy to stand among knights, had my father trained me up in thoughts like these?'

She turned her head away as though with a little offence, but he continued gently :

'You are no longer a child, and it is not fit that you should now think like one. You remember well the words that were told you years ago, listen now to what I tell you. It is not that the advance of riper years will leave you free to follow every wilful fancy—nay, it does but bind to closer service ; and though we be born to rule, yet it is not for the indulgence of weak desire ; else were the nobler sort not raised above the spirit of the

basest peasants, who till their lands. And full as straitly as I hold myself bound to follow glory, as the pole-star of every worthy knight ; so do I deem you constrained to tread in footsteps of charity, the fitting guide of all ladies. Therefore should you care for the sick, and all who are in distress.'

Claudine listened to this in silence, though with a little expression of perplexity ; and then answered, with a look of great sweetness :

'I would attend on you, Bertram, if you were sick.'

'I know it !' he answered, with a smile ; then, taking both her hands, 'Claudine,' he asked seriously, 'did you not love my father ?'

'You know well that I did,' she replied quickly.

'Then never speak of dislike to the follower he loved most, and who deserved well of him ; but rather strive to help our good Stephen at his need, now that his heart is breaking for my father's love.'

After Bertram had spoken to her thus, Claudine endeavoured for a time, though not with great willingness, to carry out his wishes as far as she could ; but Stephen appeared rather disturbed and wearied, than gratified, by any of the little attentions she could show ; and talking annoyed him. Seeing this, she soon withdrew from any attempt to win or console him ; and left the old man to the sole company of the gloomy thoughts, which seemed to please him so much better than her own.

As time passed on it became evident that Stephen's mind began to wander a little, and that he was gradually losing his clearness of recollection : and before the winter was over all late events seemed to have faded from his memory ; and he lived again through the events of his earlier life, of which he would constantly talk to himself, as though they were now passing around him. So fixed did this hallucination become, that he once appeared suddenly in the courtyard, where the din of arms was heard, under the idea that they were preparing for that expedition to the Holy Land which the Baron had joined in early youth ; but the long period of inaction, through which he had passed, had now so much enfeebled his

frame that physical exertion was no longer possible to him ; and after watching for a few moments those active exercises in which he could never again take part, he turned away with a sad look of perplexity. Shortly afterwards, having apparently lost this impression, he turned to one who stood near, asking :

‘ Where is my lord ? he should surely be here at this time.’

The man addressed pointed out Bertram, who stood at no great distance ; but he, having caught the old man’s question, hastened to reply gently that the Baron was absent.

‘ So, so,’ muttered Stephen ; ‘ then he must soon return. I will climb to the high tower and watch for his coming.’ From that day he often mounted to the place whence his sight could command the widest view of the surrounding country, and would gaze for hours into the distance, expecting to see the Baron’s pennon overtop the smaller trees, while he himself rode forward to the gates, mounted upon the favourite charger who had drawn his last breath years before his master. ‘ The ways are long and rough,’ Stephen would say as he turned away disappointed ; ‘ but he will come : he will be with us soon.’

Bertram he no longer recognised, remembering him only, if at all, as the little child of long ago ; and almost all who now surrounded him seemed in like manner lost to his memory. Bertram had some hope that these slight tokens of returning activity might indicate a favourable change in Stephen’s condition ; but in this he was deceived, for with the approach of spring the old man seemed to lose strength rapidly, and was soon too feeble to leave his chair.

On the evening of one of those soft and tranquil days which sometimes occur in early spring, Bertram, who had but just returned from hunting, sat leaning his arm upon the window-ledge, and idly watching the gambols of two or three rough dogs, who were engaged in boisterous play outside. From time to time he glanced towards Stephen, where he sat over the fire which yet burned upon the hearth, and beside him a fine deerhound, who had been

the favourite of the Baron, and had lately seemed as though, by a secret sympathy, to be much attracted towards Stephen. The old man's hand rested upon the head of the dog, crouching quietly beside him ; and the silence was unbroken till Bertram's attention was awakened by observing that the dog had become suddenly restless and uneasy, whining and licking the hands of the sick man, even seeking to climb upon his knees in evident distress, and an importunate craving for some mark of attention. Bertram was unable, in his present position, to see the face of the figure before him ; he stepped forward and laid his hand on Stephen's shoulder, but there was no motion ; he took his cold hand and looked fixedly into his face—the old man was dead.

Bertram sat leaning his head upon his hand in an attitude of despondency while some of the attendants carried away the lifeless body ; and one of his more confidential retainers, observing him, said gravely :

‘This is no cause which should make you cast down, my lord ; all that was best in him had gone long ago. For me, I could even rejoice to think that the body no longer tarries here behind the spirit, for it saddened me to remember him as he was.’

‘Thou art right though, but in part,’ answered Bertram ; ‘and he is now where he had longed to be. And yet I cannot part from this old friend without some sadness ; the world is changing fast around us. Yet even in his last dark days, we cannot say that the old spirit had left him quite, for that loving devotion to my father, which showed so clearly then, was no less native to his brave and faithful heart, than the valour and constancy we saw in him before.’

The loss of Stephen was regarded, by the inferior inmates of the castle, rather with those feelings of strangeness and discomfort, with which men miss the presence of objects rendered familiar to them by long habit, than with much personal regret. He had always been somewhat saturnine and difficult of approach towards them, without that frank and jovial bearing which might have ensured his popularity ; and it might have been, also, that many

were jealous of the high degree of favour and confidence, bestowed by their lord upon one, whom they regarded as no more than an equal mate with themselves. Two or three who had been his chosen companions for years did, indeed, watch his gradual decline and death with feelings of a deeper nature ; but Bertram was surprised to see so little general regret manifested on the loss of this most favoured retainer of his father ; not reflecting how seldom it is, that one person succeeds in rendering himself acceptable, at the same time to those above, and to those below him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE sun of a lovely spring morning was shining brightly upon so watery and desolate a world, that the very beams which warmed and brightened it seemed to look down, as if in mockery, upon the scene beneath. A violent storm of wind and rain had swept over the country on the night before, and brought much destruction in its train ; breaking and crashing down the boughs of the strongest forest trees ; tearing off the thatched roofs of many of the wretched huts of the peasantry ; and filling the brooks and rivers till they overflowed the meadows through which they ran, while all the smaller plants and grasses were bent and dragged upon the ground.

The immediate precincts of the castle did, indeed, among its bare and rugged stones, present a less unusual appearance than the wild and natural scenes without ; but even here all looked soaked and dreary, and dripping with wet. Claudine, nevertheless, had ventured forth almost before the tempest had well subsided ; and now that the noon-day sun had at last fully broken through the obscuring clouds, was standing with a favourite falcon on her hand, upon which she lavished many caresses, quite indifferent to the dripping water which wetted and soiled her dress, or the rushing wind which disordered her hair.

As she stood thus, Bertram came up to her, and said, smiling :

‘ You seem like a spirit of the woods, Claudine, who has ridden hither on the storm. But you are wet and chilled here ; walk with me upon this side, where we may find some shelter, for I must speak with you.’

‘ I do not like to hear you speak so,’ she answered, as she complied with his request ; ‘ for I see that it is in your mind to be serious, and I am more inclined to mirth to-day.’

‘ I shall be sorry if I put your mirth to flight,’ said Bertram, with a reassuring smile ; ‘ but that I trust I need not do. But you will hear me for a few moments ? Nay, let the falcon fly, and turn your eyes to me and listen.’

‘ I will listen,’ replied Claudine ; ‘ but I will keep my bird. Bertram, he has just been eating from my hand, and I have trained and tended him since first he left the egg ; but the falconer says it is a finer hawk than any he has under his care. Do but look at it ; you have not seen it of late.’

‘ It is a noble bird !’ said Bertram, looking at the hawk with a more attentive eye, and speaking with honest admiration, while his hand caressed it almost as fondly as hers had done. ‘ I have seldom seen one more beautiful. If he be as swift and sure, the falconer speaks truth, and we have not a finer in the castle ; but you know I have never yet seen him flown.’

‘ It is swifter than any,’ declared the girl in eager partisanship, at which Bertram laughed.

‘ Well,’ he said, ‘ I will not doubt it ; but we must talk to-day of other things than falcons. Claudine,’ he added, taking her hand and looking at her gravely, ‘ we must be married.’

Claudine started, and became suddenly as serious as he.

‘ Married ?’ she repeated, in a tone which might have expressed either surprise or dismay, or a mixture of both.

‘ Surely,’ answered Bertram, surprised at her surprise. ‘ Indeed, I do not well know whether I have been right to delay it so long ; but I could ill bear to overshadow

our bridal day by the dark clouds which have gathered round us of late. Now, with the return of spring, methinks all else looks brighter, too. You know all that has passed between us long since, and what would have been before, but for the accidents that hindered it ; and now I do but come to bid you say upon what day we shall clasp each other's hands again in sight of all.'

Claudine's face had been gradually growing pale as he spoke, and it was with a look almost of distress that she now gazed up at him.

'Oh, Bertram !' she said entreatingly, 'must it be so soon ? May we not tarry a little longer ?'

'What is this, Claudine ?' asked Bertram, regarding her with anxiety ; 'are you not pledged to me, and do you wish to fulfil that pledge no longer ?'

'It is only—only,' she replied, hesitating and stammering painfully, 'that I would not be wed again yet, so soon.'

'So soon, Claudine ! we have waited long. I little thought you could desire further delay. Do you not remember,' he added gently, after a pause, during which Claudine did not lift her eyes from the ground—'do you not remember that this is but the fulfilment of my father's designs for us both, which he had purposed himself to carry out, had he been able ?'

'I did but wish for some delay,' she faltered, feeling, from his tone of grave surprise, that she must have incurred some mysterious guilt, in preferring such a request.

'And you will not tell me why ? You yielded without a thought of reluctance when my father first bid us think of this ; what has taught you since to shrink from me thus ? Indeed, Claudine, I have been to blame in not speaking sooner ; this should have been done before to-day. Whence comes this hesitation ? You were not wont to fear me ; and, indeed,' he added, with a slight smile, 'you have no cause.'

'It is not you I fear,' said Claudine, looking up and speaking with more of her natural frankness and confidence ; 'but, Bertram, I know not how it is that, day by

day, the thought of our marriage seems to grow yet a greater terror to me. I could have met it readily before we parted, though sometimes I think I feared it a little even then ; but now do not ask me to be more closely bound.'

Distressed, as well as perplexed, by the unexpected frame of mind in which he found her, Bertram looked at her in silence for a few moments, seeking to read the riddle in her downcast face.

'Have I, then, grown hateful in your eyes?' he asked, in a tone which told of so much disappointment, that her cheeks flushed and her eyes half filled, as she answered imploringly :

'Nay, Bertram ; not that. You must not think it—you do not, I know.'

'Then, Claudine, you are but shrinking from a shadow. You dare not go forward because you see not well what lies beyond, as a child, wandering alone in some strange hall, pauses fearfully on the threshold of a closed door, and will not venture further, not knowing that light and warmth, and loving faces await him within. Our bridal day will kill these doubts and fears.'

'No, leave me to myself—I cannot now,' she repeated. 'We have been happy before, why should we alter now ? Let all be still as it has been.'

'If we wait,' said Bertram gravely, 'will time have power to aid us ?'

'I cannot tell,' she answered openly ; 'it may be that in time I should be less afraid ; and yet it seems sometimes that I could never wish to be wed again—to be bound more straitly than now.'

'The cloister, then,' said Bertram sadly ; but she cried out hastily, in an accent almost of horror :

'Oh, never, never that !'

Still at a loss to understand her, Bertram looked at her for an instant with a somewhat darkened brow, and murmured doubtfully to himself the name of Gaston.

'No, no, no !' exclaimed Claudine, with greater vehemence than she had yet displayed. 'He to exert any sway over me ! Bertram, you cannot think it ?'

'I do not,' he answered quietly. 'Even where I scarce can understand you, I can trust; but, Claudine, think again; you know not well what you do.'

'Oh, Bertram!' she answered impetuously; 'when last we spoke of this, it was you who told me that I might yet be freed if I would; you said I should not be coerced.'

'You shall not,' replied Bertram gently; 'it were an uncourteous, an unknighly part, should I seek to constrain you. Trust me, I will press you no more.'

With these words he turned away, and began to pace thoughtfully up and down over the rough flagstones: while Claudine remained standing where he had left her, leaning upon the low wall, and gazing abstractedly at the wide prospect which lay stretched before her. Then her eyes strayed to Bertram, where he walked in the shadow at a little distance; and she began to wonder whether he would return. Some instinct kept her there patiently waiting for him; and at last he did again step quietly to her side, wearing a look of gravity and decision indeed, but with little enough outward indication of deep feeling of any kind. Claudine had been playing with her falcon, but at his approach she let the bird fly, and stood prepared to listen to all he might have to say. The face she turned towards him had a vague trouble in it, and there was something in his expression or bearing which seemed to alarm her a little.

'Claudine,' he said, 'I have been thinking of what is fitting now to be done, since our first designs are brought to nought; for you must see with me that we cannot now dwell together in this castle as heretofore. You must now be placed under other care than mine.'

'We cannot, Bertram?' said Claudine, looking at him in unfeigned surprise. 'Why can we not do as we have ever done? Would you say that I must quit you?'

'I fear it must be so,' replied Bertram; 'nay, had I but known your mind sooner, I had told you this long since.'

'But that is not my wish,' cried she; a little frightened at finding that the words she had spoken brought with

them consequences of which she had not dreamed. 'Let me remain here still! Indeed, I do not wish to go.'

'There is but one way, Claudine,' answered Bertram seriously;—watching her countenance, as though he thought it possible that this new idea might change her feeling even now. She said only, however:

'Oh, I am sorry!' and, clasping her hands together, looked up at him with yet more earnest attention.

'I intend but what is right in this matter, trust me,' he continued; 'and well I know it is not meet that you should be longer here. All my thought has been of what asylum may be the most proper for you; and it has seemed to me that none can be more fitting than that of the Convent of St. Agnes, where your aunt, the Lady Prioress, will have you in her care.'

'Oh, Bertram!' cried the girl; 'the very name of convent has something in it which chills me; it speaks of something cold and harsh and stern, which makes me shrink away.'

'It need not,' said Bertram, smiling sadly; 'think of it rather as the holy house of religion, the refuge of the oppressed, the comforter of the sick and poor; aye, and the protecting guardian of many such as thee, who need the shelter of its walls. Think also that it was this same convent which fostered your infancy, that it was there you were first placed by your father's care.'

'Yes,' said Claudine; 'I remember well the day they brought me hither, and I must have been happy there, for it grieved me much when they carried me away. Is there aught there that I might know still, I wonder, should I see all again?'

Bertram stood moodily leaning his arm upon the wall during the long pause that followed, watching how her face grew brighter and brighter by degrees, as she looked on into the new future unfolding before her, and found it seeming clearer and more inviting than before.

Her thoughts had wandered very far from the point around which his still lingered, before she turned to him with an air of animation, and asked whether he thought she might keep with her horse, and her

favourite hawk and dogs, if she should go to the convent.

‘I can scarcely think it,’ answered he, starting from his reverie. ‘You must learn to be something less of a wild wood-bird. Nay, but we will tend them for you here, with all care; that when hereafter we shall welcome home again our lady of the castle, as I can but hope we may, all will be found as well as now.’

‘Bertram,’ said she suddenly, with a little apprehension in her tone, ‘must I go thither alone? I thought not of that.’

‘Not alone; take two women for attendance, that you may not lack well-known faces. Would you have old Margery follow you?’

Claudine made no immediate answer, but resolved in secret that Margery should not accompany her to this new home; in the very unlikely event of her nurse being anxious so to alter the entire course of her life, even for such a cause. She would have her new life free from all the restraints which had seemed, however gently, to bind the old.

‘I can recall many things now that I cast my thoughts upon them,’ she said; ‘but nothing can I remember of my aunt. Tell me, Bertram, have you ever seen or heard aught of her?’

‘Nay, I know nothing,’ he replied; ‘we held no converse with the convent, as you know. It is all my hope that she may prove to you a kind and gracious guardian. So soon as opportunity can serve, I shall conduct you to her.’

As soon as he had finished speaking, Bertram moved aside to attend to a person who at this moment approached him, with the appearance of having some matter of consequence to lay before him; and Claudine remarked, with some little feeling of compunction, that his step was now heavy and spiritless, and his whole air and attitude one of dejection.

The poor old nurse, who was now fast sinking into decrepit age, heard with great lamentation of the result of this momentous conversation; and drawing down

Claudine's head upon her bosom, as the girl sat upon a low seat by her side, cried over it silently—while she rocked gently to and fro, as though nursing a young child.

'Oh, my darling child!' she began to moan; 'that I should live to see the day that divides you again from my lord, and from us all; and sends you back into that black and dreary convent from which I brought you—is it ten? nay, more than ten years since. That dark and scornful lady, with flashing eyes and guileful lips—the kind saints forbid that you should ever fall into her hands again, my pretty bird! What ails you, then, at the old walls that nursed you, and the loving hearts that prized you, that you would turn aside from them again for the gloomy cloister?'

'It is not I that would go thither, nurse,' replied the young lady in exculpatory tones. 'Bertram himself it was who told me this must be, since I could not accede to his desire.'

'And in that the young lord did but tell you truth,' said the old woman, raising herself a little from her despondent attitude, and looking into Claudine's face as she fondly stroked her hair; 'but what ails you at *him*, that you will scorn the love and faith of a gallant and gentle lord? Ah, child, I much fear that you are one of those who would fling from them a rich jewel, knowing not its price; and go in poverty and need all their lives through for the lack of it.'

'I do not scorn it,' answered Claudine simply. 'Margery, how think you that I could scorn Bertram? But I know not why it is that I would not be bound to him further than I am already bound.'

'Where would you find one nobler?' demanded the old woman, half kindling to anger as her hereditary loyalty swelled within her; 'and even were he matched for faith and valour, where will you seek a kinder, Lady Claudine? They say that great lords are harsh and terrible, but it is in the kind and gentle spirit that you will find your happiness; and such as these are not seen often.'

‘I do not wish to seek another,’ said Claudine, with a slight accent of indignation in her own voice. ‘Am I not bound to Bertram already? I will not draw the bond tighter now, but I do not seek to loosen it. Why would you tell me what I know already? Think you that I do not know him kind, valiant and honourable?’

Margery sighed, and sat silent for a few moments, gazing idly at the wall. Claudine, who leaned upon her old nurse’s knees, looking steadily up into her face, presently broke the pause:

‘Nurse, you have seen my aunt, I know; tell me of her.’

Margery shook her head sadly.

‘It is little I can tell,’ she said; ‘but she struggled hard to keep you with her still, and sorely did she grudge that your noble father should have the child beside his dying bed. Then there was a flash in her black eyes, and a ring in her voice, that made me shrink from her in fear.’

‘It may be that she held me very dear,’ said Claudine, ‘and would have kept me by her for her love.’

‘It might be so, it might be so, for she held you long in loving embraces; but yet I fear, and it loads my heart to think that she shall have the caging of my pretty bird again. Ah!’ she continued, looking searchingly in the open countenance of the girl, who coloured under her gaze, and the words that followed, ‘I see how it is. You are glad to quit the old castle, glad to go to the arms of strangers, and leave behind the hearts that truly loved you. The days are long and weary here—was not that your thought?—and you would fill them with something new. Oh, but young maids are hard to bind; they are ever for fresh scenes and strange faces.’

Claudine made no answer, but dropped her head upon Margery’s lap, and began to cry wearily before her words were done; and then the old woman strove to soothe her back into the hopeful mood, which she had disturbed, by soft words and gentle caresses.

Claudine could not shake from her mind, however, the impressions of doubt, almost of apprehension, which she

had drawn from Margery's manner of speaking of this unknown aunt. They were slight and vague, and by no means of sufficient force to alarm her from her purpose. or, indeed, to oppress her much in any way ; but they were always in the background, and ready to spring forth whenever her dreams for the future turned upon the personal qualities, and kindred affection, she might expect to find in her aunt.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BERTRAM sent messages more than once to the Prioress of St. Agnes, acquainting her with Claudine's wishes and his own views ; to which answers were received, importing that the lady highly approved the action of her niece, and would readily afford her protection. The girl herself passed the short time, before her departure, in such various moods of eager hopefulness and depression, that she would have found it hard to tell whether she felt more gladness or sorrow, now that the change of life for which she had often longed had come to her. Still, her will was never shaken ; and not many days after the stormy morning on which her destiny had been fixed, she was conveyed to the gates of the convent ; where she was left by her escort, with only the women who were to remain as her attendants.

' Farewell, Claudine,' said Bertram, as he parted from her beneath those overshadowing gray walls which seemed about to entomb her. ' You must return one day ; I will still hope soon ; and you know—do you not ?—how warm will be the welcome when you come. A warm welcome from all, but before all from me, if you can come to be my own true lady ! The old castle will be but a weary place when it lacks you.'

His eyes looked into hers with an expression so sorrowful, that it seemed to dawn upon her now that she had wounded him more deeply than she knew ; and her own heart, being

sadly downcast in this last moment, she answered impulsively :

‘Bertram, I am sorry too ! I will return one day, if I am able.’

He smiled as he turned away, and waved his hand to her ; but even then Claudine little suspected with how heavy a heart he rode homeward, nor how much bitterness she had added to the sense of loss, which had so weighed on him during these last months.

As she entered the outer boundaries of the convent, and found herself almost entirely alone with strangers, in a place which appeared to her as yet so grim and colourless, Claudine felt a sense of utter helplessness and desolation come upon her ; and the half-fanciful dread she had before experienced, of the encounter with her unknown aunt, returned with double force. With a species of self-scorn, however, at the indulgence of a sentiment which she had learned to consider unworthy of her, she struggled for a more calm and even tone of mind ; and employed the short interval before the Prioress came to receive her in minutely observing all the features of the apartment in which she stood, striving to discover some objects which might recall childish recollections. In this effort she did not succeed, for all she saw around her seemed entirely new ; and, indeed, she was now in a part of the convent into which she had seldom penetrated in those early days.

After no long interval the entrance of the Prioress recalled her to the present. Claudine looked towards her with a little air of doubtful timidity, but without the heart-beating with which she had anticipated this meeting ; and saw a small, frail-looking figure clad loosely in black robes, and a countenance which, whatever might be its more usual expression, certainly bore at that moment no indication either of haughtiness or asperity. Claudine was turning to seek the blessing of one who seemed so well entitled, both by closeness of relationship and the sanctity of her profession, to command her respect ; but in that moment she was folded in an affectionate embrace, which seemed to speak of a welcome so sincere as to leave no room for feelings of loneliness or regret.

‘Thou art indeed welcome, my dearest child!’ said the Prioress as she released her. ‘Little did I think when they forced thee from my unwilling arms, that what I then lost should at a future day be so happily restored. Be of good cheer now, for thou hast gained a sure and loving shelter from all who would oppress or constrain thee.’

‘There are none who would oppress,’ began Claudine; but her aunt, breaking in upon the words she would have uttered, proceeded kindly:

‘Thou art wearied, little one, and in need of refreshment and rest. Go now with the good sister, whom I will call to attend thee, and afterwards we will talk together.’

The girl obediently followed the nun who was summoned to her assistance, without at first particularly remarking her; but when they had left the presence of the Prioress, Claudine, looking up, saw the gaze of her elderly and serious guide fixed upon her, with an expression of such tender and unmistakable interest, as to arrest her own attention. A moment she looked at her in doubt, then cried gladly:

‘It is Sister Rachel! is it not Sister Rachel?’ and, scarcely waiting for the answering word and smile, flung her arms impulsively round the good sister’s neck, exclaiming: ‘Ah, Sister Rachel, you little thought that I could know you after so long time! Say, now, did not you think I had forgotten?’

‘Truly, I had feared it,’ replied the sober nun, smiling with an unusual flush of pleasurable excitement on her cheek; ‘we can scarce look for long remembrance from babes.’

Claudine’s spirits had risen far above their usual height, now that her mind was relieved from every shadow of apprehension, as to the manner in which she might be welcomed into this new home; and she soon began to chatter with as confidential a freedom to this new, and yet old, friend, as though she were again by Margery’s side.

‘I was half in fear to meet my aunt,’ she said at last; ‘they told me she was cold and stern, and one to be

dreaded. But now I will love her well, dear sister ; for she looks at me only with affection, and I know that she is nought but kind and good. Is it not true as I say ?'

The grave eyes of Sister Rachel rested for a moment on Claudine's animated face, but she maintained a discreet silence, and told her a moment afterwards that she must now return to the presence of the Prioress, who desired to speak with her more at length.

The Prioress received her niece with a smile of pleasure on her return to the parlour, and drew her down to a seat by her side, with the affectionate familiarity which is so apt to win the hearts of the young. Taking both of Claudine's hands within her own, the lady held her for some time at a little distance, while examining her features with earnest scrutiny ; then, as though satisfied, she drew her into her arms and kissed her.

'They have given thee good nurture, I see,' she said, after a moment's silence, during which Claudine sought, by sundry furtive glances, to observe the appearance of her aunt more closely. 'I can scarce find again the little maid they snatched from me. Here is health and spirit in thine eyes, my child ; yes, and beauty, too,' she added, stroking the fast-crimsoning cheeks. 'Ah, little one, the day may come when a troop of gallant knights shall sue upon their knees, for a smile from those sweet lips.'

'I should never wish for them,' said Claudine, looking at her aunt in unfeigned astonishment, on hearing sentiments from her lips, so little in character with the serious piety, which seemed accordant with her position.

The Prioress saw and read the glance ; and, biting her lips in some vexation at her own words, changed the subject rather abruptly.

'I have heard but lately,' she said, 'of the manner in which the Baron de Drumont met his death. Tell me, hath he used thee with kindness during the time he was thy guardian ?'

'Indeed,' replied Claudine with warmth, 'he was to me as the most tender father.'

'It is well to hear that he so cherished thee,' said the lady, with a smile which it might have been hard to

interpret ; 'but canst thou marvel greatly, my niece, that it grieved me sadly to yield thee into his hands ; and send thee into a rough and warlike castle, where were no lady's watchful eye, and hand, to give thee gentle guidance, or lead thy steps into the paths of womanly grace and goodness ?'

A slight pause followed, during which the Prioress musingly fingered the rosary which fell upon her breast, looking down at it ; then she raised her head and spoke again :

'I am well content with thy conduct, little niece ; thou hast fled to the most fitting asylum.'

'It was Bertram who bid me come hither,' said Claudine shyly ; 'he told me that it was not well I should still remain with him in his castle, since I would not again give him my hand.'

'Thou wouldst speak of the boy with whom they formed that childish contract. Ah ! few can know with what joy I heard that the bond might be broken, which linked us to a house whose alliance was, for so good cause, so bitter to me.'

Claudine, half frightened and half perplexed by the words which her aunt addressed to her, but soothed and gratified by the intimate tenderness of her manner, attempted no answer ; and the Prioress, holding her fast in her arms, in such a position that she could read with ease the play of expression upon the upturned face, looked earnestly into it while she pursued her after-inquiries.

'So thou couldst not look with eyes of favour on this young cavalier, my child ? Tell me of him. What were the defects which repelled thee ? Was he harsh and uncourteous ?'

'No, no in truth !' replied Claudine ; 'he was ever most kind to me.'

'Was he, then, clownish and maladroit ? unskilled alike in manly exercise and in the gentler arts which may win a lady's grace ?'

Claudine strove to turn her face a little away from the questioning eyes, as she repeated the former 'No.'

‘Then,’ pursued the Prioress, in the same tone, ‘he was perhaps a coward, with a hand unready for any deed of gallant daring, or a heart ever ready to plot treason?’

‘No, no, no!’ cried Claudine vehemently, and with cheeks glowing red between indignation and embarrassment; ‘how can you say such things, dear aunt? Why will you ask me all these questions?’

Seeing the half-shrinking, half-indignant look, the Prioress sought, by fresh endearments, to banish it.

‘My sweet little niece,’ she said, as she caressed the girl, ‘I said not that it was so; I did but seek to discover the grounds of thy displeasure with the young Baron. Well, then, if thou sayest he is kind and courteous, valiant and honourable, a cavalier accomplished as well in the arts of peace as in war, we must seek some other cause for this aversion. It may be that he was a monster, fearful to look upon, and without any of the graces of person which might draw the regards of a young maiden? Again no? Then can I guess no further; but must leave it to thine own lips to discover his fault.’

‘Oh, dear aunt,’ replied Claudine, almost crying, ‘it was not—indeed, it was not such things as these that moved me. It was for no defect in Bertram that I quitted him; he is all that is gallant and noble. Were it not only that he will look so grave sometimes, and will seek to fix my mind on serious things, which I can scarce understand. It is only that I would not be bound again, more straitly than I already am, to any man; but, if to any, then I would choose him before the whole world.’

The Prioress abandoned instantly the lighter tone she had assumed, and looked for a moment very gravely at Claudine, while she asked, with equal seriousness:

‘Hast thou come hither, dear niece, with any wish to lay down the cares and vanity of the world, by accepting the veil of our blessed order?’

‘Oh, dear aunt, you will not ask that from me,’ said Claudine, with a glance in which apprehension was too clearly manifest to leave any room for doubt as to her feelings. ‘That were to bind me more strongly still. It is as they all tell me. Must we ever be fettered? May

we never be free as men are? I wish but for freedom. Oh, I would I had been a man!' and Claudine ended really in tears, which seemed to alarm her aunt; who immediately set herself, by all means she could think of, to reassure her niece.

'I will ask nothing, dearest child, which shall distress thee,' she said fondly. 'We will have no more of this talk; thou art weary in heart no less than from the long ride in the chill air. Only rest in this calm retreat, and cast all doubts and griefs away. See,' she said, gently raising the girl's head, and directing her eyes towards the narrow window which was at no great distance, 'yonder is our garden. This is a place to rest in, with its cool walks and quiet gray corridors.'

Claudine smiled, and looked with some interest at the herb garden which lay without; and the Prioress began gently to rearrange her disordered hair while continuing to speak. 'Thou art now in thy mother's sister's care,' she said, imprinting a fond kiss upon the forehead of her niece. 'Tell me, canst thou love thine aunt?'

In answer, Claudine clasped both arms round the neck of the Prioress, and embraced her with a freedom, which would greatly have astonished the sober nuns, who were only accustomed to approach her person with a species of awful reverence.

The lady, however, received this unwonted familiarity with a very gracious smile; and then rising, she extended her hand to Claudine, saying:

'Come now with me to the vespers in our chapel, where thou shalt hear the sisters sing.'

Claudine followed her in silence; and in no long time afterwards, had forgotten all the events of her first day of arrival, in sleep.

CHAPTER XXV.

BERTRAM meanwhile rode sadly homeward, without even an attempt to shake off the melancholy which weighed upon him. Even on the following morning the shadow

was not lifted, but hung around him for days, as though a sudden November blast had blighted the spring season. He could scarcely have told, indeed, whether he loved Claudine as lovers love, but he felt that the clouds which had encompassed him throughout the past winter, and had only now begun to break, closed in upon him more darkly than before. Claudine had been the last thing remaining to him which could connect the past with the present ; she had been given to his charge at so early an age, that the duty of cherishing and protecting her seemed to have been impressed and ingrained into his mind, till life looked blank for the time when suddenly deprived of it. He walked moodily alone through the greater part of the day, till at last the very solitude he sought became oppressive to him. When evening came on he sat silent in the hall, leaning his head upon his hand, still lost in the brooding thoughts which had haunted him all day. How well he recalled in those half-dreaming memories the day when her dying father, smiling kindly on him, had begged him to be a gentle guardian to the little daughter, whom he feared to leave to the cold mercies of the world ! and how proud and overjoyed the boy had been to receive such a trust !

Bertram wondered vaguely whether Claudine could have remembered, as he did, how his father and her own had first placed her hand in his ; or, if she remembered, how could she now so hesitate to fulfil what they had begun ? To him it had seemed like a sacred duty owed to his dead father, thus to carry out what had been his desire. A chill, desolate feeling came over him as he thought that even the child-wife, the little companion he had been wont to call entirely his own, had deserted him at the very time when all his world seemed falling in ruins. Was it not cruel to leave him now ? His father, poor old Stephen, Father Paul, all who had supported or directed his childhood, were gone, and now Claudine was lost also.

If Claudine could have known how heavy a heart she had left behind, she would scarcely have enjoyed so sweet a slumber upon her first night at the convent, nor have

viewed with so much interest and content the new surroundings among which, for a time, at least, she was to dwell.

Bertram was only roused from his deep reverie by feeling a hand laid suddenly upon his shoulder, while a well-known voice said, in a tone of cheering sympathy :

‘Come, my lord ; can you not even look up to greet an old friend ?’

Bertram started to his feet on the instant, and gave one wondering look into the face of the new-comer.

‘Philip, dear Philip,’ he cried, and the next moment was hanging round the neck of Philip de Tourville, embracing and half weeping on his shoulder, as he might have done twelve years before.

His friend returned the embrace with warmth ; but did not speak until Bertram, at last releasing him, stood looking at him with a smile now brightening his face, and said :

‘Philip, I was thinking but now that every friend I had ever had, was dead or lost to me. How came you hither in this moment to show me that I erred ? I heard no token of your approach.’

‘You were so deep in thought,’ replied Sir Philip, smiling, ‘that you did not hear me ; yet did I clatter as loudly as I could over the stones to make you lift your head ; and Eustace here twice warned you of my approach, but you paid no heed to him.’

‘I cannot tell you,’ said Bertram, ‘what delight, what comfort your presence brings me.’

‘You need not try,’ answered Sir Philip, looking at his flushed and brightened face, and falling back half unconsciously into the elder brotherly manner he had used towards the child ; ‘I know that eager look too well. Indeed, it was my hope to bring comfort when first I thought to turn aside from my road, and see how all fared with the old castle ; for I have heard of all that weighs your spirits down ; the death of my dear old lord, and the manner of it.’

‘You have not yet heard all,’ replied Bertram, holding the hand of his welcome guest in a warm clasp, ‘but we

will speak no further of it now ; you are famished and wearied, I doubt not.'

'By my faith,' replied Sir Philip, 'when a man has been in the saddle from dawn till dark, not on one day alone, but for many preceding, and has not eaten for twelve hours, nor laid in a bed for seven nights, methinks he may have good leave to be both.'

Indeed, the white teeth which parted in a smile after this observation, soon proved by the ardour of the assault which he made upon the viands set before him, that such was the case. Bertram watched his friend with laughing eyes while he appeased the first wrath of his hunger, till at length Sir Philip, looking up during a temporary pause, said gaily :

'Friend host, you must eat with me, and pledge me in wine, else shall I not call this a kindly welcome.'

'If thou canst spare aught from thy cheer,' replied Bertram with a gleam of mischief, 'I half misdoubted it.'

'Nay, do not make a mock of either,' said Sir Philip, laughing ; 'I promise thee if thou hadst passed through those experiences I spoke of, thou wouldst have been pressed with hunger as well as I.'

However light and playful might have been Sir Philip's tone throughout that evening, it was in a graver mood that he paced his chamber when alone, musing, with his eyes on the ground, on the many changes which had visited that place during the years of his absence ; it was in a graver mood that he looked from the window upon the familiar scene without, and threw himself upon his bed at last to dream that he met the Baron's hand, and heard the Baron's voice to welcome him there again.

It was only in the morning, after having visited together all the castle precincts, and while leaning quietly against a gray stone wall to rest, that these serious themes were revived with Bertram.

'In good truth,' said Sir Philip, as his eyes explored the pleasant prospect spread out before him, 'this is a fair inheritance.'

'I care not for it,' answered Bertram indifferently, avoiding the glance of his friend.

‘And yet,’ continued Sir Philip, ‘it looks pleasantly in the eyes of a poor knight, such as I am, who must gain his lordship, if ever he do attain it, at the sword’s point.’

‘Are we less alone upon the height than in the valley?’ said Bertram sadly; ‘I care not for it, Philip, for the old castle has lost all that made it once pleasing; it is empty now. My lordship is nought to me but a heavy weight. Can I rejoice in the heritage which comes through the loss of my father?’

‘Bertram,’ answered his companion gravely, with a kind hand laid again upon his shoulder, ‘I would bid you remember that if we see those who upheld our childhood falling so fast around us, it doth but the more become us who are young to step forward and fill the vacant place; to fill it with a firm spirit, and a true endeavour to follow where they led in the pursuit of honour, not with a mind cast down by calamity, as yours, I fear, is now. Keep a high heart within your breast, if you would succeed your father worthily.’

Startled by hearing again the very words which the Baron had last spoken to him, Bertram was silent for a few moments in thought; and it was in a somewhat altered tone that he presently asked whether Sir Philip had been aware of the death of Stephen, and of Father Paul, as well as that of the Baron himself. He answered that he had; and they talked long of the circumstances attending these several events, until Sir Philip broke a long pause by observing suddenly:

‘Last night you said to me that I knew not all which had chanced of late to disturb your peace—is there more to tell me? What of the Lady Claudine? I have not yet seen her, and had almost asked for her more than once.’

Bertram related what had recently passed between Claudine and himself; to which his friend listened seriously, but said at the close, with a reassuring smile:

‘Never be downcast for that, and all may soon be well again. It were less than wise to attach too much weight to the caprices of young maidens.’

‘I will hope so,’ answered Bertram reflectively; ‘and

truly I do think that she clings to me with a kind of trust which may yet grow to more.'

'You would rejoice if it were so?' asked Sir Philip, watching him, 'and would have the marriage riveted rather than broken? Why, then, I would rejoice also; nor do I think we have great cause for fear in the matter. A woman is always in twenty moods before she can fix her mind to one. And truly they are not without some show of reason in that; for since women, for the most part, are called to act but once in all their lives, their case would be a hard one if they might not linger a little over their choice.'

He ended with a half laugh, but there was something in his words which seemed to grate a little upon Bertram. This was not a subject on which he was inclined to smile, and he did not pursue it further. A moment later he turned round again with a rekindled face, to beg Sir Philip to remain with him so long as he would or could, and help to cheer the loneliness of the castle. This he readily agreed to do, for some days at least, and Bertram found much wholesome comfort in his society.

After he left it the young Baron no longer shunned the company of others, or showed himself careless of the daily life which surrounded him; but mingled freely with the castle inmates, and ordered all within and without its gates, precisely as it had been in the time of his father. There seemed little change in him, yet he sometimes showed by slight actions how often Claudine was in his thoughts. He seemed no longer greatly depressed by her absence; but as though he waited for her, convinced that she would return at no distant time.

'Oh ay,' said old Margery, as she strained her fading sight over the loom, 'she will come to us again, fear not that; the swallow will ever return to its old nest. More than that, yonder gray walls will shut in but a grim prison to the child who loved so well the freedom of the woods. If she might return with her fancy less set upon those same woods, with her mind and her hands more ready for the well-guiding of a household, wherein should lie a lady's chiefest pride, I at least could be well content

with it ;' and the old woman dashed a tear or two from her eyes, as she tried to rectify the tangle, which had grown beneath her hands, while her thoughts wandered away to dwell upon the child she fondly spoke of as her own.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CLAUDINE, within the convent, did indeed soon begin to feel the loss of the much larger measure of liberty which she had been accustomed to enjoy ; but there was, nevertheless, much to compensate her for a little additional confinement. She was treated with great kindness, and the sisters vied with each other in petting her like a favourite child, more especially as they saw that their superior, the Prioress, manifested always the most tender indulgence towards her ; and it seemed to them a very fair means of winning her favour to follow the example thus set before them. Claudine, who doubted nothing of the sincerity of their affection, was delighted to find herself where she was so much beloved ; womanly tenderness was almost new to her, and came like a warm sunshine to illumine what might else have seemed gloomy in the convent life.

The life which was led there, however, was in reality somewhat less ascetic than might have seemed usual ; for the lady who presided over it was not of a disposition to renounce without many a backward glance the freedom and indulgence of the secular life ; and without, perhaps, anything which could be construed into direct defiance of conventual rule, the appointments of the monastery were more luxurious, the habits of life more lax, than they would have been under the government of one, having a stricter self-denial and more devoted religion. All those points of minor arrangement which might be considered doubtful, and in which the more austere spirits would have dreaded a sinful compliance with the customs of the outer world, were here decided unhesitatingly in their

loosest construction—questions relating to the table or the couch, as well as to the furniture of the apartments, and the occupations which filled the time of their inmates. This was especially the case in the rooms set apart for the private use of the Prioress herself; and, indeed, it could have been no matter for surprise that a woman who had entered the cloisters with no other feelings than those of strong reluctance, and almost under direct compulsion, should constantly cast longing glances upon the world she had been forced to abandon, and strive to surround herself as far as possible with the luxury she had foregone. By this indulgence, though it could not be said that she had attracted to herself the love of her subordinates, she had succeeded in rendering herself rather feared than disliked.

Claudine, whose fancy had pictured all persons retired from the world as saints, found her aunt very different from the image she had formerly conceived of her, and was perhaps relieved to find her as she was. A harsh and austere guardian Claudine had scarcely feared; but she had looked forward with some apprehension to the strict seriousness which she believed inseparable from a religious profession; but the conversations which her aunt held with her were all upon subjects of worldly interest, and it seemed as though she shrank from graver themes. These conversations were frequent, for the Prioress seemed to take pleasure in keeping her niece as much as possible near to herself; and Claudine was always glad when her attendance was required in the parlour of the superior. During these long and constant private interviews the Prioress endeavoured to sound to the very depths the heart of her young relative; and while seeking by fondness and indulgence to gain her affection, she also aimed at establishing over her an ascendancy which might, if need were, be turned to account at some future time.

Claudine was always sent for when her aunt was occupied with needlework, in which she passed no inconsiderable portion of her time; and it soon became a source of interest for the girl to watch the progress of the dainty work which issued rapidly from the lady's practised fingers. Embroidery such as this she had

never seen before, for though Margery held this branch of feminine industry in high honour, and diligently practised it whenever she was able, her employments were too many and too various to admit of her acquiring that unerring skill, which made the needle, when in the hand of the Prioress, an instrument scarcely less effective than the brush of a painter. Perhaps, too, that natural taste which is but a lower form of genius was wanting ; and certainly this labour was not, with the nurse, as with the lady, a vivid and almost solitary source of interest. For the Prioress, the canvas upon which she wove many fanciful images, had become almost as a book in which she could write her thoughts ; and when she held in her hand her completed work, she could read clearly, as though wrought into each brilliant device, the reflections which had filled her mind while the needle was busy, and which she could have dared to confide to no other.

Thus her needle and her silks had become a resource and a solace much needed in a life always lonely and often sad. Claudine remarked, however, that while the work accomplished by the sisters of the convent was devoted to the embellishment of the chapel, which was well furnished with these results of their industry ; that of her aunt was laid away in a chest as soon as completed, and never again saw the light. The reason for this appeared to be, that the Prioress had no taste for the representation of such scriptural subjects, as might have graced the draperies proper to the chapel ; but preferred depicting such warlike or amatory scenes, as would have been out of place, to say the least, if openly exposed within this pious establishment.

‘Thou art keen to watch me,’ said the lady one day, as she looked up from her work and found Claudine’s eyes fixed upon her. ‘Hast thou any skill of needle craft ? Come hither and take the needle and set some stitches in this tapestry, that I may see what thy training has been.’

‘I cannot, I have not skill,’ began Claudine, hesitating ; but as her aunt motioned her to approach, and quietly placed the needle in her hand, she was obliged at least to

endeavour to obey. Now, for the first time she began to regret her ignorance of womanly accomplishments; she tumbled and creased the rich stuff upon which the elaborate pattern was to be embroidered; set every stitch awry, and tangled and knotted her silk till she could work no longer. Colouring with vexation, she looked up at last to the watchful eyes which had followed her every motion, and the lady said coldly:

‘I had scarce thought to find thee so maladroit. It would seem that the Baron de Drumont had bestowed little care upon thy upbringing, if thou hast never learned the arts which beseeem a lady’s condition.’

‘It was not that they would not teach me,’ said Claudine; ‘but that I had no will to learn. I loved to wander at my own fancy more than to sit confined.’

‘Ah, my child,’ replied her aunt, stroking her hair with a tender hand; ‘thou wilt make me yet more regret our parting, if I hear thee thus speak with disdain of those gracious arts, in which women should find their pride.’

‘Not with disdain,’ said Claudine, looking ruefully at the spoiled work which her aunt was endeavouring to rectify; ‘for I would truly that I knew all that you could wish; but patience will always fail me.’

The lady smiled but made no reply, and said, after a pause:

‘As it pleases thee to watch my needle, open yonder carved chest, dear Claudine. In it is laid almost every piece of dainty work that I have wrought from my first maidenhood.’

Claudine obeyed, and drew out one by one many specimens of gorgeous tapestry, robes stiff with embroidery, or silken banners of which the gay colours had slowly faded, through long years of seclusion and forgetfulness. Claudine was holding one of these latter in her hand, looking at it, to say the truth, with a little wonder as to how it had chanced that it had not only been embroidered by the hands of the holy mother, but had been thus carefully preserved by her; when the Prioress meeting her sudden upward glance, said in that regretful

tone, with which persons somewhat advanced in life will often review their younger days :

‘Of what art thou thinking, little one? Does it seem to thee so strange a thing that I, too, have been a young maiden once? Ay, and nursed, it may be, more fantastic dreams in my silly brain than ever yet have entered into thine.’

Claudine drew a little nearer to her aunt; her face filled with the absorbing desire she felt to hear something of the early life of this newly-found relative, who had speedily become from a shadowy name, an irresistible attraction, of engrossing interest to her thoughts. The lady took the banner into her own hands, and began thoughtfully to smooth its tumbled folds, while she examined it with a sorrowful smile.

‘My years could not have counted more than thine when I wrought it,’ she continued, in a kind of abstraction. ‘It was for my father, when he followed Cœur de Lion to the holy wars; but after all, he took it not. How long is that since? Ah, I cannot tell; the days and years leave no record here; I have lost my time.’

‘It was long ago,’ said Claudine softly, hoping that her aunt would tell her more, and moved at that moment—she could not have told why—with a sudden sense of pity for her.

‘Yes, long ago,’ assented the Prioress; ‘and yet it does not seem so now. How gay, how brilliant, was our castle in the days before they sailed for Palestine! Child, I was something different then, from that to which age and grief have changed me. Oh, but I could tell many a tale of all that I then saw within my father’s castle; of splendid banquets, of the hawking and the hunting, and the gallant knights that filled his halls—drawn thither, as many said, by my eyes; but what can I tell of that? I know only how many sought my favour—my hand in the dance, a flower, a scarf, yes, or a smile only, were prizes sought for then, and struggled for. Many a time have I given the tourney prize to one who held his toils all overpaid by one kindly glance. Would not that please thee, little niece?’

Claudine was silent, and looked up at her with a gaze half frightened, half wondering. In her mind the predominant feeling was one of astonishment, on hearing such words from the lips that uttered them. The lady read the look, and turned away with a half-impatient movement, saying, as though to herself :

‘Ah, she is a child.’

‘That was my summer-time,’ she resumed ; ‘it has been bleak winter to me since, for life is barren now. The company that filled the old halls is all gone. Like the grass when it is mown.’ Here she stopped suddenly, struck, perhaps, by the remembrance of the source from which the image she was employing had unconsciously recurred to her memory. ‘I saw them part for Palestine,’ she presently resumed, ‘one wore my favour, but he brought it not back to me again.’

During these last words, Claudine, continuing her researches, drew forth a richly adorned and embroidered surcoat, which had obviously never been worn by him for whom it had been destined. With an exclamation of surprise, she recognised the familiar cognizance of the Baron de Drumont wrought upon the breast, and left still unfinished. She held it up with a questioning look, but her aunt caught it at once rather hastily from her hand, with an appearance of more disquiet than the slight occasion seemed to warrant ; and, after refolding it carefully, rose to replace it at once in the chest from which it had been taken.

‘These old relics bring back the past somewhat too strongly to my memory,’ she said, glancing at her niece with an effort at a smile ; ‘lay them away now. I scarce know why I showed them to thee.’

Claudine obeyed in silence, longing, but not daring, to ask an explanation of the circumstance which had surprised her. Then, having again closed the chest, she came and stood beside her aunt, watching the rapid progress of her needle during a pause, which was not broken until the lady lifted her dark eyes and asked abruptly of what she was thinking. Claudine replied without reflection :

‘I wondered how it had been that you ever took the

veil, for it was surely distasteful to you as to me ;' she stopped suddenly, with a consciousness that her speech was indiscreet, and, warned by a single expressive glance, that she had passed the limits of the freedom, which even her aunt's indulgence accorded her.

There was, indeed, some anger in the lady's eyes, which was not apparent in the cold and quiet tones of her voice, when she afterwards spoke.

'Those are not fitting words to be said to me,' she said, and bent over her work again for some moments in silence ; while Claudine stood beside her a little troubled, wishing that she might go, but unwilling to do so without some sign of dismissal. 'Is it because I have called up some memories of the far past for thee, Claudine, that thou hast these thoughts of me?' said the Prioress, smiling ; 'such matters are pleasing indeed to such as thee ; but they show a different face to those who, tired with the world, have laid it down. This is so dull and serious an abiding place for the young, dear child, that I thought to pleasure thee by old wives' tales of bygone days, that thou mightest not lack some entertainment to cheer thy spirits.'

'Indeed, I love well to hear of the passages of your youth,' said Claudine ; 'will you not tell me further of them ?'

The lady's smile appeared to promise a resumption of the theme at some future time ; but she did not at that moment pursue it, merely observing in an inquiring tone :

'It would seem that the Baron's castle had shown thee little more of life and colour than our convent here ; thou hast nought to say of all the gallantries, and braveries, that are wont to form the delight of the world without.'

'Truly,' answered Claudine, 'the Baron kept but a sober household, and it is little that I know of such things save from the lips of minstrels.'

'Poor child,' said the Prioress, while she smoothed the hair with her constant caressing action ; 'but never sigh for that, one day thou shalt taste all these pleasures.'

Claudine left her aunt with the feeling of perplexity she always experienced in regard to her. She scarcely

knew whether she loved her, in spite of the constant endearments which she had found it very pleasant to receive from this new relative. She was much attracted by her aunt, but it seemed as though there were some slight influence of repulsion working at the same time. Meantime it was in these familiar interviews that Claudine received her first lessons in worldliness. Indeed, it appeared as though the Prioress were seeking of a set purpose to dazzle the girl with visions of pomp and splendour; and her influence was exerted in the very opposite direction from what might have been expected in their relative positions.

CHAPTER XXVII.

It was well for Claudine that there were others in the convent who felt an interest for her, not inferior to that which was displayed by its head, and who were better fitted to guide and influence her. Among the sisters of the convent were several women of serious and pious temperament, and lives devoted to charity, who felt that the frank, spirited girl, who had come like a breath of fresh, invigorating air into that secluded place, was fast making her way to their hearts. The nun whom Claudine had recognised as Sister Rachel in particular, was drawn towards her by that tender solicitude, which a woman can scarcely fail to feel for any child, who has been her charge in infancy. Claudine was not long in learning that Sister Rachel, though she never used towards her such marks of caressing fondness, as the Prioress was accustomed to display, regarded her with a deep and sincere affection, which she soon returned with complete confidence. Reserved and serious as this new friend might be, and an unlike companion for a lively girl, Claudine yet loved and sought her society; while the sister enjoyed the intercourse with all that gratification which a woman, wearied by sad experience, will often find in the companionship of a younger and more hopeful spirit.

Accordingly she introduced Claudine into the hospital for the sick, where lay her especial charge, and brought her acquainted with the whole round of her daily life ; and the girl looked and wondered, interested by the novelty of all she saw ; but even while she caught from it, as she could scarcely fail to do, some sense of the beauty of self-devoted charity—this newly-awakened impression came, mingled with the feeling that her own feet were too feeble, by far, to follow on the road now opening before her.

One morning Claudine stood looking with rather wistful eyes at the leaves fluttering in the brilliant sunshine without, and thinking, with some regretful longings, of pleasant spots near the familiar castle, where in former days she had spent many such spring mornings as this in unrestrained liberty. The convent walls seemed to melt away as she gazed and thought ; and she was again riding by the side of the old forest, mounted upon the horse who knew and loved her so well. The low sound of waving boughs, and the notes of the wood-pigeon and the cuckoo, appeared so real to her fancy, that she started in surprise when the gentle voice of Sister Rachel recalled her to the present, asking whether she would not come with her to the garden, while she gathered the herbs needful for various medicines and simples.

Claudine with a sigh turned away from the picture of the breezy forest, and followed her into the trim herb garden, where scarcely a flower was suffered to grow unless it could be made of use for either medicinal or culinary purposes. There was the sunshine here, at least, and the fresh morning air ; but the girl did not seem to brighten under their influence, as she stood in a rather pensive mood to watch the sister busily plucking and sorting her herbs ; while she occasionally broke off a spray to drop into the basket in a kind of pretence of assisting in the work. Sister Rachel, seldom the first to break silence, presently glanced at her companion with a look which so plainly inquired the reason of her gravity, that Claudine answered it as though she had spoken.

‘ This will be a bright day among the woodlands,’ she

said ; ' I would I might have my palfrey and my falcon, and range at my will as of old.'

' These walls, then, for me a blessed shelter, are nought to thee but the bars of a dreary prison,' said the sister, looking with a half-compassionate glance into the young face, half eager, half discontented, which turned towards her. ' Well, the children will ever love to play in the open sunshine—it is only those wearied with long labour in the burning heat, who turn with joy to the sheltering shade.'

' But I am glad that I came here,' said Claudine ; ' without that I should not have known you, dear sister ; and I feel that it is good to be with you, who are so very, very charitable and kind. I love to hear you tell of all your work, and to see you comfort the poor and sick people ; and yet I cannot tell how you bear these things, Sister Rachel—to be always among those who are so wretched and squalid and base.'

' That is our charge,' replied the sister gently ; ' and it is love which must lighten it. Until that fails us, the burden can never grow too heavy.'

' Oh yes,' said Claudine, tearing the leaves from a spray of marjoram, and scattering the fragments over the ground ; ' it is because you are good and pious that you are so content. If I, too, could be pious, as you are, it may be that I should think no more of the woods, or feel myself confined and bound. Yet, Sister Rachel, when I was at the castle, where I might roam at my fancy, I wearied even there, and often longed for fresh scenes.'

Her companion answered only by a quiet smile, the meaning of which Claudine sought silently for a moment ; but before she had time to ask, she had thrown herself, with an exclamation of pleasure, upon a cluster of late white violets, which had sprung up, chance-sown, in some neglected corner.

' I thought there were no flowers here,' she said ; ' why do not you let them grow in your garden, as well as these that you call sweet herbs, which are not sweet at all ?'

The sister explained that the garden was so needful for the medicinal and kitchen herbs consumed in the convent,

that there was neither space nor attention to spare for anything less serviceable.

‘Though I love them well,’ she said ; ‘for they speak to me of my childhood. Your eyes are keen, Lady Claudine, while mine grow more dull day by day ; yet had I marked that tuft of blossoms and watched their unfolding days since.’

Claudine silently thrust the violets into her hand, and, after a pause of a few moments, said, with an apparently abrupt transition of ideas :

‘Sister Rachel, you are not like to my aunt. I can scarce tell how it is that you differ so, but it seems sometimes as though it must be that you have more piety than she ; though I had thought before that she, at the head of all, must have more than any other.’

The serious nun, startled out of the reverie in which she had been indulging, could only reply to this unlooked-for speech with a look of surprise which was almost consternation ; and Claudine hurried on, anticipating some reproof :

‘Indeed, I have often thought it, dear sister, and may not I say what I think ? You seem never so happy as when you are among the sick, caring for them, or giving bread to the poor who come to seek it ; but my aunt loves not even to enter the hospital, and she never gives the ragged beggars a glance, as though she loved them, as you do. Then, too, she ever talks to me of things in the life without, till she has made me think that she would fain be in the world again ; although she could not say it, and never would have quitted it of her own will.’

Claudine might have gone on much longer, detailing the conclusions which her observant eyes, and active mind, had drawn upon many points ; but the sister, laying a hand upon her arm, here interrupted her in tones of serious remonstrance.

‘My child,’ she said, ‘these are words as unfit for me to hear as for thee to speak ; and wander too far from the reverence which should be used by all here towards the holy mother.’

‘I would have said it to no other,’ answered Claudine,

with an appealing glance ; ‘ but I say all that I think to you.’

‘ Neither to me nor to another, nor to thine own thoughts even, should such things be said,’ replied the sister, who had been almost alarmed by the bold expressions of her young favourite. ‘ Child, child ! you are too reckless, and know not how needful it is to watch over the thoughts that spring from the heart, and the words that fall from the lips.’

The girl turned away with a half-impatient sigh. She fretted a little against the restraints of outward decorum, which she was now expected to observe in speech and action ; recalling the time when she could freely pour out all her thoughts without check or blame.

The sister gathered up her herbs and carried them within, where Claudine, following, stood for some time to watch her busy hands sorting, tying, and otherwise preparing them for use. This done, Sister Rachel proceeded to visit the hospital, and she still accompanied her, though with a momentary hesitation, having never yet gone further than the threshold, but now feeling impelled by curiosity to step within. The building was large and lofty, though at that time somewhat too crowded with inmates ; and its inner appointments, if they were rough and insufficient, were at least made as complete and effective as the care and attention of the nursing sisters could render them. Indeed, the whole scene appeared to Claudine not quite so distressful as she had anticipated ; as she stood to watch it at some distance, while the sister moved about softly from one to another bed, busied with many cares.

Before long Claudine’s attention was attracted by the cry of a child, left for the moment unattended—a poor little emaciated infant of about two years, who had met with severe injury through fire. A womanly instinct prompted her to draw nearer to the helpless little creature, and endeavour to still its cries ; she sought by all means in her power to soothe and distract it, and would have taken it in her arms had she ventured. She was so occupied with it that she turned aside with a start, when a message was conveyed to her from the Prioress, requiring

her presence. Claudine glanced somewhat apprehensively at her dress, the negligent arrangement of which had often called forth a disapproving look from the Prioress, who thought her niece very unfinished in all the outward graces which should have signalized a high-born lady.

W. WALLISON.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE Prioress was to be found, not in the private room wherein Claudine usually sat with her — but in the parlour devoted to the reception of strangers ; and at the time of her niece's entrance was engaged in close conversation with a cavalier, the magnificence of whose appointments formed the solitary point of splendour in the dull and soberly-fitted room. The girl stood apart in silence for some moments, until her aunt, observing her presence, moved a little back from the grated partition, which divided her from the visitor whom she was receiving ; and putting Claudine forward sufficiently to be more clearly seen, said to her :

‘ Claudine, my child, salute this noble knight. It is thy cousin, the Baron de Raston, of whom I have told thee so often.’

Claudine glanced quickly at the figure before her on hearing this familiar name ; but was attracted so little by the countenance and bearing of this new-found relative, that she acknowledged the reverential salutation, and carefully-turned compliment, with which he greeted her with a coldness, and restraint of manner, too obvious to pass unremarked.

The Baron Armand de Raston was not, indeed, a person very likely to attract the eyes of a young maiden, or spontaneously to win her confidence. It was not that by nature his form or countenance had been rendered especially repulsive ; his features were, indeed, somewhat harsh, but otherwise good, and might even at an earlier period have been accounted handsome, by those who

looked no further than the mere outward form. But Armand de Raston, though still comparatively a young man, had reached that time of life when the passions and vices indulged without restraint, will often leave their traces imprinted upon the countenance, in characters so legible, that no reticence or caution in speech, or conduct, can entirely efface the impression they produce. Claudine shrank instinctively from the cold hard glitter of his eye, and marked the displeasing droop of his full and sensuous lips; even while she stood, with eyes cast down, listening to the ready flow of soft and polished language, with which he thought it fitting to compliment his lady cousin, on this first occasion of meeting her. All that he said merely comprehended the commonplaces of the fantastic gallantry of that age, and she answered him at no greater length than strict necessity required; for his honeyed words had done nothing, as yet at least, to diminish the feeling of repulsion with which he had at once inspired her.

In a short time he took his leave, saluting his aunt with an air of deep reverence; and would fain have parted from his cousin with a kiss of her hand, but that she drew back with a formal recognition, and an expression in which his quick eye did not fail to read some degree of aversion. At this he smiled; and the Prioress glanced a little sharply at Claudine, but said nothing. Then, with another low reverence, he left them.

The lady now withdrew to her private room, still keeping her niece by her side, saying nothing of the Baron de Raston, who was at most times a rather favourite theme of discourse with her. On the contrary, she sat down to her embroidery in total silence, and with a shade of deep thought in her expression. Claudine stood beside her, musing too intently herself even to wish to break the silence.

The thoughts of the Prioress had followed the nephew who had just quitted her; who stood, indeed, higher in her favour than his wild and lawless course of life would have seemed to augur, or perhaps to warrant; but Armand de Raston had succeeded in concealing many of the worst passages of his life from his aunt, whose

countenance and regard were of considerable consequence to him.

For the rest, she was no very harsh judge of such matters as he could not prevent from occasionally reaching her ears ; and the follies of youth, as she would have termed them, met with far more indulgence from her than maiden aunts are usually ready to accord. There are few women who do not find it necessary to bestow their devotion on some object outside themselves ; and the affection which for years she had lavished, in her loneliness, upon this favourite nephew was, however misplaced, one of the better traits in the lady's nature. It was little to be wondered at, then, that she was blind to the darker side of his character.

'Claudine,' said the Prioress at last, without raising her eyes, 'the time has now come when it will be well to concert some measures for liberating you from the ties by which you were bound in childhood, but which the judgment of a riper age has drawn you to discard.'

Claudine looked up in surprise, believing, yet doubting, that she understood the meaning of these words, yet marvelling that her aunt should have spoken them. Before she had time to reply, the lady answered the questioning look :

'Understand me well, dear niece ; I would speak of that early betrothment with the young Baron de Drumont, from whom thou hast come to seek my protection. That protection thou shalt have ; and, fear nothing, it is no unconquerable destiny which has bound thee, for chains like these may oft be relaxed again by favour and by wise advisement.'

'But, dear aunt,' replied Claudine earnestly, 'I would not have it so. True it is that I have said to Bertram that I would not now wed with him again ; but not that I would have our childhood's union sundered. My father joined our hands upon his death-bed ; how shall I undo what he did with his last breath ? The Baron, my dear second father, wished us drawn together more closely yet, and himself would have fulfilled that desire, were it not——'

She paused, with a sudden sense which had never struck her so forcibly before, that she had refused to fulfil the last wishes of that kind foster-father.

'Thou fearest,' said the Prioress, with a wilful misunderstanding of her words, 'that the young Baron will seek by all means to hold thee bound to him. Poor child ! but we will find a way to free thee yet.'

'I fear nothing from Bertram,' answered Claudine, with a rising colour, 'for I know well that he is too knightly, and too generous, to hold me bound. At one word from me he would do all to free me ; but I——'

'It is well, then,' interposed the Prioress calmly, before the sentence could be completed ; 'we have the less hindrance to dread.'

'But I will never say such a word,' pursued the girl earnestly, and with kindling eyes ; 'I would not do him so great a scorn, for though I wish no lord, had I to seek one throughout the world, my choice would fall on him.'

'In truth, then, my fair niece,' said the Prioress, looking at her with a cold gaze of surprise, 'it much perplexes me to guess why you have thus fled from his protection, to throw yourself on mine. Young maids are not used to dally thus in these matters ; but where they love they wed, and when they quit a cavalier they return not again. It would seem that you had thought to whistle back your knight again, as readily as a flown falcon. When first you made appeal to me I had no thought of this.'

'Yet, when Bertram quitted me at the gate,' said Claudine, with a rather startled look, 'he told me of his joy when I should one day return, and I answered him.'

The Prioress smiled with a little contempt.

'Poor child ! for how many weeks dost think the thought of thee was in his heart ? Come hither, closer, and tell me what thy simple purpose was in flying from one, whom I now find to stand so highly favoured by your grace.'

Claudine drew a little nearer, indeed, but not to the low seat she often occupied by her aunt's side. She stood looking at her with an expression half doubtful, half indignant.

‘I had no other purpose,’ she replied, half crying, ‘than the desire to remain yet a little longer in maidenhood. And, indeed, it was not I who sought protection here, but Bertram bid me come. How could I wish to leave him, when I knew him all my dear old nurse had said to me?’

‘It was childish folly,’ said her aunt, in a tone of one in reflection; ‘but we must trifle now no longer. Since thou hast left him, indeed, I see not now how that may be amended, or how return can be. Listen, Claudine, it pleased me well to see thee come to me, and quit the alliance which it had grieved my heart to think should be. Yes, long and deeply have I grieved that thy father, in the weakness of his dying hours, had given thee to the care of those, who bore so little love to me and mine. Child, there was no union possible but would have been less hateful to me; for good cause indeed have I had to dread the name of the Baron de Drumont. It is on the duty thou owest me, that I charge thee to do thy part in aiding us to undo this marriage, which cannot now be perfected. Wilt thou not do it for thy duty? Canst thou not for my love?’

‘I will never do this,’ answered Claudine; and there was a tone of decision in her voice which made her aunt glance curiously at her. She had not expected to find much difficulty with the girl; a girl so young could not surely be hard to guide or control, by one who had ruled over so many women, young and old, for years. The Prioress had endeavoured for many weeks to read the character of her niece, and thought she had succeeded. She believed her childish and simple, even beyond what is usual at her years; and, in spite of some degree of wilfulness, fostered, so the lady thought, by too lax government, easy to guide or influence, and without the power of strong purpose. She believed, too, that she had been so far successful in gaining Claudine’s affection, as to assure her sway over her. Now, as she looked at the girl and noted an expression, which had been familiar years ago on the face of her father, the Prioress began to wonder

whether she had mistaken her ; and would find the task of management less easy than she had anticipated.

‘It matters little,’ thought she ; ‘I have had to deal with strong wills, as well as feeble ones, ere now.’

‘See,’ she said aloud in collected tones, and as though Claudine’s last words had been unheard, ‘here I have recorded the prayer it is needful that I should address to those, who have the disposal of these high affairs, for the breaking of thy baby marriage ; take the pen, my child, and set thy name beneath it here. Thou hast learned of late, I think, so much skill as may suffice to inscribe thy name.’

‘I cannot,’ murmured Claudine, standing still on the same spot, with eyes fixed on the ground.

‘Thou canst not!’ repeated the Prioress, affecting surprise ; ‘and yet methought it was but yesterday, that I found Sister Ursula guiding thy hand to the formation of the letters, and after I saw “Claudine,” “Claudine,” writ so many times by these little fingers, that they cannot sure by to-day have lost all their cunning.’

Claudine turned aside with a proud impatience. There is nothing so well calculated to wound the spirit of a sensitive girl, as a tone of raillery in her more earnest moments ; and her aunt, watching her always, immediately left the lighter manner.

‘Dear little one,’ she said, rising and approaching her niece, whom she folded in her arms as fondly as upon the day of their first meeting, ‘my dearest sister’s child, dost thou not love me ?’

‘Yes,’ replied Claudine, but in a tone of some little constraint.

‘Then thou wilt do this thing for my love ? Dear child, it is but a little thing I ask.’

The girl merely shook her head in answer, and, after enduring silently for some time her aunt’s caresses, bent her head over her hands and burst into tears. The lady now thought herself on the point of success, and, taking the pen in her hand, said gently :

‘Come, my child.’

But Claudine shook her head for the second time ; and

there was a somewhat angry gleam in her tearful eyes, as she looked towards her aunt.

‘In very truth, niece,’ said the Prioress more coldly, ‘it is strange to me to see you thus disturbed, and weeping so fondly, for one whom you have left so willingly.’

‘I would that I had never left him,’ cried Claudine, lifting her head high in her more fiery mood; ‘I would I were with Bertram now; he never urged me unkindly. It is true, as Margery told me, I shall find none kinder. Oh, why did I come here? Let me return now to the old castle.’

‘Claudine,’ said the Prioress gravely, ‘it was of your own will that you came within these gates; but it would ill become my duty were I to suffer you now to quit my protection to seek that of others, whom I must deem unfit for such a charge. I see that your mind is of those which yield, as light as thistle-down, to every changing mood. But you will think of this yet, and yield to my desire.’

‘Why is it,’ said Claudine, turning towards her in a mood of strange excitement, ‘that you will still speak thus of Bertram, as though he were unmeet for me? Why do you ever speak of the Baron as of an enemy of my house? Have they not been kind to me? None were ever kinder. It cannot be that I do wrong to cling to those to whom my father gave me. Never will I ask to have that union sundered; no, though each day you should ask it from me; for, should I ever wed, Bertram, and no other, shall be my lord.’

The Prioress gazed upon her niece for a moment in complete astonishment, which even overpowered displeasure. Whence had the girl drawn this bold and unbending spirit? How far she differed from the meek and gentle maidens bred within the convent, who scarcely ventured to lift their voices in her presence! She had at first been as well amused, as gratified, by the frank and confiding simplicity with which Claudine had been accustomed to converse with her, and had, indeed, directly encouraged it as the most likely means of establishing the influence she desired; but now she felt at a loss in what

manner to receive speeches of so much freedom as those, which had been addressed to her on this morning. The Prioress, however, seldom indulged in angry emotions which might interfere with her cherished plans, and was, moreover, in a degree, attached to her niece. A glance at Claudine's glowing face, convinced her that any efforts to bend her will by force must be, at least for the present, ineffectual. She therefore suppressed the open manifestation of any displeasure which she might have felt, but said very coldly :

'It would seem that, whatever the teachings which were given thee in the Baron's household, they have failed, at least, to instruct thee in the practice of that due reverence which maidens use. I am not wont to hear words spoken with such heat and boldness.'

Claudine looked up timidly, her mood of excitement half passed.

'Dear aunt,' she said, 'it is you who have taught me to speak to you freely all my thoughts.'

'I know not when I have taught you, niece,' replied the Prioress, in the same tone, 'to depart from the rules of temperance and modesty in discourse. Now leave me. Hereafter I shall hope to find in you something more of docility and submission than I see to-day.'

Claudine was not sorry to withdraw, and her aunt watched her as she left the room with a half-smile. She had not felt sure of at once attaining her object on this occasion, though a little surprised to see the girl display so much of spirit and firmness ; and now she merely placed in a conspicuous position the parchment, which she had sought to press her niece to sign ; resolving not for some time to revive a subject, on which she now doubted whether she had not already said too much.

From that day forth Claudine thought more of Bertram than she had yet done ; until she learned at last to look upon him as a future deliverer, from a condition which she was beginning to find irksome. Her wilful spirit, too, rose at the attempt at constraint, and the immediate effect of the perhaps rather premature and injudicious pressure, which the Prioress had employed, was to

diminish, in no inconsiderable degree, the influence she had been at some pains to acquire over her.

It was some little time before Claudine again recollected the visit of the Baron de Raston, so much had her thoughts been occupied with the succeeding colloquy ; but at length she found an opportunity to speak of it to Sister Rachel, asking, with a natural curiosity, whether she could tell her nothing more of her cousin, who was, as she knew, in the habit of occasionally visiting the convent. The sister, who had not failed to notice the unfavourable impression which Claudine had received of her relative, replied, with caution, that she knew but little of the Baron, for it ill became her to listen to or repeat tales of the outer world—but that she knew him to be highly favoured by the Prioress, his aunt. Claudine had learned that it was useless to press Sister Rachel upon any point on which she thought it unfitting to speak, and therefore did not pursue the question with her ; for her tone had been so decidedly reserved, as to show that the subject displeased her.

Others, however, were less prudent, and many of the nuns showed no reluctance to satisfy such inquiries. Armand de Raston was a figure of some interest in the eyes of the inmates of the convent ; and the accounts which Claudine received from them, were all of a nature to increase the repulsion she felt for her cousin. They painted him as cruel and rapacious, and addicted to almost every vice ; and cherishing no principles either of religion or chivalry. But chiefly was the young girl made to shrink with horror from many a tale of his barbarity, which haunted her thoughts for hours afterwards ; for by her youth and secluded life she had learned so little of evil, that these things struck upon her mind with all the force of a new and terrible impression. To doubt the truth of any such tales never occurred to her—she accepted them with all the unhesitating faith of her age, until she came to shudder at the very thought of her cousin.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IT was not a little to Claudine's surprise that her aunt did not resume the topic, on which she had pressed her so urgently; but the Prioress held scrupulously to her resolution of complete silence as the best course to pursue for the present. Still, Claudine was not permitted entirely to forget that conversation; she could not but feel a change in her aunt's manner, which was now overshadowed by a cloud of gravity and coldness, contrasting sharply with the caressing kindness she had at first displayed towards her.

Claudine's presence was now less frequently desired in the apartment of the Prioress; and when there, she felt herself suddenly removed to a much greater distance from the relative, in whom she had at first been led to confide as trustingly as in a mother. Yet the lady's eyes might often be seen to fall, with a glance not devoid of meaning, upon the parchment which she had been careful to leave exposed; and Claudine knew that the least sign of her yielding would be welcomed with redoubled fondness; but so many various feelings united to withhold her from complying with her aunt's desire, that there was little prospect of that desire being fulfilled for some time to come.

Although the Prioress now saw less of Claudine than she had hitherto done, at ordinary times, she never failed to send for her when Armand de Raston paid one of his visits to the convent; and it was observed by the sharp-eyed nuns that these visits were now more often repeated than they had formerly been, and became, in fact, more frequent than was altogether usual in such a case; though the Baron de Raston sometimes sought for some excuse connected with the affairs of the convent, under colour of which his call might be made.

Claudine stood silent for the most part before her cousin, and shrank from his complimentary addresses as though they had been insults, though it was evident that he was at some pains to conciliate her regard. Armand

de Raston was not a man of close observation ; but even he could not fail to note that Claudine regarded him with positive aversion. The Prioress observed it also, and both marvelled ; for the lady, in her infatuation with regard to her nephew, had never thought that others might look upon him with different eyes.

Claudine, when in the presence of the Baron, had her mind continually occupied with the tales she had heard of his course of life—tales which were, perhaps, not altogether trustworthy ; for so many tongues had been busy upon the character and actions of a cavalier, who had succeeded in making himself not a little notorious, that they might not improbably have become involved in some exaggeration. Armand de Raston sought, with more patience than was common with him, to remove the unfavourable impression which he had produced upon his cousin ; but as these efforts seemed productive of but little effect, he sought at length to combat it more expressly.

‘My fair and gentle cousin,’ he said to her one day, with a look designed to be humble and appealing, but which had something sinister underlying it nevertheless, (for complete command of feature is only to be attained by the habit of self-control), ‘am I never to find a place in your favour ? I cannot think that you look upon all the world with the same cold and merciless disdain with which you are pleased to regard me.’

Claudine coloured, but was silent, looking at De Raston with appealing eyes, as though she would have begged him not to press her for an expression of friendship, or regard, which she could not find in her heart to give.

‘How can I prove to you,’ he pursued, speaking in the softest tones he could assume, ‘that I am not unworthy of some share of your kindness ? Is there nothing in which I may serve you, which can manifest the esteem—nay, the devotion—which my heart contains for so noble and lovely a kinswoman ?’

He paused, so obviously awaiting, even requiring, a reply, that she felt herself compelled to answer, in a low tone :

‘No ; there is nothing.’

‘I see,’ he said, ‘that there is some weighty cause of displeasure, which lies in your mind against me. May I not learn in what I have been so unhappy as to offend?’

Again Claudine was silent ; and the Baron, whose patience was not of long endurance, bent a rather cloudy look upon her, and threw a shade of peremptoriness in his tone when he again spoke :

‘I pray of you, sweet Lady Claudine, to tell me what cause it is which has thus possessed your mind against me. I have ever striven to bear myself as it was befitting towards you ; and, by this hand, I love not to be misconstrued !’

Feeling now driven to a direct answer, Claudine looked up boldly :

‘I have heard so much of you,’ she said ; ‘they call you cruel, lawless, and dissolute ; and is it true, as they have told me,’ she continued in tones rendered low by a shrinking horror, yet perfectly clear and distinct, ‘that you once caused a peasant to be roasted before a slow fire, because in some trifle he had displeased you?’

There was silence for some moments after this, and Claudine began to feel a little frightened at her own unconsidered words.

‘Thou shouldst not give ear to idle tales,’ said the Prioress in reproving tones, as soon as she had recovered from her astonishment.

It was not the first time that Claudine’s childish straightforwardness of speech had greatly disconcerted her. Armand de Raston was literally unable to speak for the time ; but Claudine was so startled by the expression of rage which disfigured his features, that she shrank farther away from his vicinity, and turned her eyes rather apprehensively upon her aunt. When at last he would have found words, the Prioress interposed anxiously to prevent him from speaking ; fearful of such a display as might both disgust and terrify Claudine, besides being very ill-suited to the time and place. She therefore desired her niece to leave them ; and then, turning to the Baron, entreated him now to quit the convent, pledging

herself to do all that could be done to remove the prejudices Claudine had so unhappily conceived against him.

To this task, which was, indeed, of some importance to them both, the lady addressed herself with all the skill she could command ; and having, without much difficulty, contrived to draw from her niece the whole of the accounts she had received to the disadvantage of the Baron, began to speak very gravely upon the evil effects of slander ; and the caution which prudence, no less than charity, demanded in the acceptance of such ill-reports. The Prioress was, indeed, exceedingly irritated upon finding that Claudine's mind had been so seriously prepossessed against her cousin ; but she dissembled her anger, and tried, by saying all she could in her nephew's praise, or in his excuse, where no other was possible, to correct the earlier impression.

Claudine could make no answer to these representations ; and though her quick perception had taught her a slight undefined distrust of her aunt, they were yet not without some effect upon her views of the character of Armand de Raston. On the after occasions of her seeing him, therefore, she submitted to his presence with a little less reluctance ; and endured his attention with something more of toleration than before—a change with which the Baron was readily satisfied ; and if the Prioress was less completely so, she was content, nevertheless, to leave it to time to do the rest.

It was some little time before the Prioress thought it well again to introduce with Claudine the subject of the dissolution of her union with Bertram ; but when she did so, she had the vexation of finding the girl still as steadfast in refusal as before. This matter was one of anxious consequence to the lady, who was determined to use all her influence, if necessary, to further the accomplishment of her wishes. She was well aware, however, that, in such a case, a slow and gradual pressure was far more likely to be effective for her purpose, than any impatient and premature attempts to compel compliance with her wishes. Her manner towards her niece became accordingly almost daily more cold and austere ; and on the

rare occasions when Claudine was now admitted to her chamber, her serious discourse and air of half-veiled reproach contrasted sharply with the former indulgent fondness ; while Claudine was now expected to use all those forms of reverence to which, however sanctioned by custom, the lady had appeared at first altogether indifferent.

Claudine began to dislike, rather than to fear, the presence of her aunt ; but even among the sisters of the convent she found her position changed ; for they, following their superior, abated so much of the flattering affection with which they had at first received her, that she, who had so lately been petted and caressed like the favourite child of the place, had now fallen back into the life of a very lonely and apparently uncared-for girl. Sister Rachel, indeed, whose attachment was of a deeper and more genuine kind, continued to treat her with all the old tenderness ; but Claudine perceived with an angry surprise how little she was now noticed among those, who had formerly professed affection towards her ; and fretted against the unaccustomed isolation in which she found herself, with all the impatience proper to the spoiled child suddenly deprived of all that indulgence and attention, which she had been taught to think her due.

The dull unvaried routine of her present life, unfilled as it was by any pursuits which might have cheered or occupied her days, became almost insupportable to her ; and if she had before sent back some regretful thoughts towards the old castle and all that it had held, she thought of them now with an almost painful longing. She withdrew herself proudly as far as she was able into the solitude of her own chamber ; where, unless the kind Sister Rachel came sometimes to seek her out, she had no other society than that of her own women, who had accompanied her by Bertram's desire upon her first coming to the convent. These women, though deeply attached to their young lady, were scarcely suitable for the position, in which they were thus placed, of her intimate companions, and were incapable of affording her judiciously either sympathy or advice ; yet Claudine

clung to them as all that was now left to her of home. In this mood she soon became something very different from the lively girl, whose occasional wild spirits had seemed almost likely to startle those grave cloisters from their propriety.

Claudine stood one morning looking listlessly out at the summer sunshine which fell in broad patches upon the stones, and watching the familiar sparrows as they chirped and fluttered over the crumbs which had just been thrown, as usual, from her hand—alms unneeded, certainly, but never despised by these sturdy little mendicants, who held it better at all seasons to gain their daily food from charity than from toil. Looking down at them, half with contempt, half with indifference, she cast out her dole liberally, smiling to see their eager striving turn into a serious fray between two or three, when the supply was nearly exhausted. She thought of the hawks who had enjoyed so much of her care in the happy days which seemed so far behind her; those noble birds had perched many times upon her hand, to eat from her fingers—how different were they from those miserable little sparrows, who were quarrelling there, knowing nothing of the hand that fed them! With a disdainful impatience she turned away, and sat down beside her two attendants, silently busy with their needles.

‘Why dost thou not speak, Louise?’ said the young lady, after a few moments’ wearied watching of their active fingers; ‘have these dreary cloisters turned thee, too, into stone like themselves? If it were so truly, I see no wonder in it, for I feel as if growing myself more near to stone every day. I shall soon come to think of my aunt as a cruel enchantress, who will keep us caged here till we are all transformed; and then we are her prisoners for ever.’

‘Oh, hush, Lady Claudine! do not speak so lightly,’ said the older woman, looking round her with an air of apprehension; but the younger, lifting from her work a pretty though insipid face, answered laughingly:

‘The Lady Prioress would well match the part of the

grim enchantress, with her dark, dreadful eyes and black robes ; and I think it is very well.'

'Why, Babette, you would not have me love my aunt?' said Claudine ; 'and yet I could have loved her at first, when it seemed that she had love for me.'

'But we must reverence those of the holy profession,' replied Babette, shaking her head gravely ; 'and before all, the holy mother.'

'Yes,' answered Claudine, with something like a sigh ; 'I know that I owe her reverence, but I think that very thought makes me love her less than ever ; that I must measure every word and action—it frets me past all bearing. Babette, Louise, are not you both sick with weariness, as I am, of this grim convent? Weary ! I am weary to death. If we were but back again in the dear old castle ! Foolish child that I was, why did I ever leave it?'

'It is all very true as you say, Lady Claudine,' replied Babette, 'and glad enough should I be to see the old place once more, and the old faces. I ever thought when first it was your pleasure to quit them, that you would have done better to remain where you had both love and honour, than to come hither. And it is very true that this is but a grim and dull abiding-place, and all that I have suffered for the want of my old companions here I could hardly tell you. Not, indeed, that there is no one with whom one may speak ; but, then, they are not of those to whom I feel that I can freely speak my mind, and knowing no more of the world, too, or of the course of life, than a five-years child ; for, truly, there is no more news upon any matters of moment can enter here, than might reach one at the bottom of a well ; and Louise there is nought but a giddy, reckless girl, and no mate for a sober woman.'

After this prolonged account of her privations, the worthy woman smoothed down her skirts and her ruffles, and bent over her needlework with more diligence than before ; while Louise laughed softly, and affected to pout at the slighting mention made of her.

'But, Lady Claudine,' resumed Babette, after a silence

of some moments, during which Claudine was abstractedly watching her, 'is it not possible that we might return, now that it is your wish? If you should seek the consent of the Lady Prioress, would she not——?'

'Dost thou think I have *not* asked it?' interrupted the young lady. 'Is there any appeal that I have left untried? Babette, dost thou remember that little bird that once flew into an open cage, and when we closed the door upon it, how the poor silly thing fluttered and struggled for its liberty, till I set the door open and let it fly? I am like that foolish little bird, but my aunt will never open the cage door.'

'But the young Baron is your affianced husband,' said Babette, with a little surprise at the tone of the last words.

'Oh! we shall return one day, never fear for that,' said Louise, casting a meaning look upon her lady; 'for if she will not release us, the Baron himself shall come, like a knight of romance, to set us free, and win back his bride again.'

Claudine coloured, but made no reply to this sally; and said, after a moment's pause:

'I will take some work, Babette; I heard thee singing over that broidery work this morning, and perhaps the needle will help to amuse some of this time which seems to pass so heavily.'

Babette accordingly put into her hands some of the embroidery on which they were engaged, which was destined for articles of clothing for Claudine herself; and supplied her with the needful materials. Then, as she continued to work slowly and awkwardly enough, it must be confessed, one or other of the women took it upon her now and then to offer some gentle correction of the manner of working. It was scarcely amusing, perhaps, neither was it yet easy; but Claudine found the occupation serve to shorten the time even better than she had expected, and she pursued this new fancy for so long as to astonish her attendants. It is true, that after Claudine had laid down her work and left the room on that day, that Louise took it up and showed it to her companion with a significant smile; and that Babette immediately

proceeded carefully to unpick all the stitches, which her lady had just set in with such infinite pains, and finished the work herself—a little deception of which Claudine had not the least suspicion, and which the good woman continued to practise, until she found it impossible to distinguish between the products of her lady's needle and those of her own.

While Claudine was still intent upon her yet perplexing labour, Sister Rachel, her kindest friend—who might almost be called the only friend now near her—came, as she often did, to seek her out ; for she had observed, and been made rather uneasy by, the fancy for seclusion which the girl had lately displayed ; and dreading the effect which the growth of such a habit might produce upon the mind of one so young, the good sister strove to break it through, and to keep her with herself as much as possible. Neither did Claudine ever find Sister Rachel's kindness unwelcome, however much, in her girlish caprice, she might sometimes shrink from others, though it was not often that she met her so warmly as to-day ; and her friend was rather surprised by the eagerness with which she sprang into her arms, almost sobbing as she hid away her face.

'Dear child,' said the sister, with a fond caress, 'come and walk with me in the garden ; it is long since I have seen thee there.'

Claudine still clung to her with that warmth of fondness, which an affection, longing after distant objects, is often fain to lavish on those which are present.

'No one loves me here but you,' she whispered.

Sister Rachel responded only by a kiss ; and took her away into one of the cool green alleys of the garden, where they might walk under shelter from the burning sun. Here, as they paced up and down, the eyes of the elder woman dwelt sadly upon the altered face and figure at her side, which had seemed to droop within a few months, like a mountain plant suddenly removed into the heat of a close chamber.

At the sound of a sigh from her companion, Claudine presently looked up, and said quite quietly :

'Sister Rachel, I am so unhappy here, that there are times when I think that I will go away.'

'My dear !' said the sister, a little startled, 'thou wilt go whither ?'

'To the home that I would I had never quitted,' replied Claudine ; 'you cannot know how happy we were in the old home, dear sister. I know well, though you have never said it, that you have thought me but a foolish child in all that I have done.'

'I looked not for much wisdom from this little head,' answered the nun, smiling rather sadly ; 'but only wait in patience and all may be well with thee yet.'

'I would strive to wait in patience,' said Claudine, 'but that my aunt will ever urge me to what I cannot do. Why is it that she will still speak of Bertram with so great bitterness ? When first I came here I thought not much upon him, but now his voice is in my ears all day ; for he was kind to me always, and not ungentle, as my aunt is.'

Sister Rachel listened to these words in silence. She found her position, indeed, a very difficult one when Claudine spoke upon these subjects ; for she could scarcely, with prudence, express her thoughts upon them, and yet would have been well pleased to show her sympathy.

'I cannot but think to-day,' continued the girl, 'of the sadness of the look that Bertram cast upon me when we parted. It must be that I dreamed it again last night. Sister Rachel, think you that it grieved him greatly when I quitted him ?'

'Nay, my child,' replied the sister, 'that I cannot say, yet it may well be so.'

She paused, for though deeply interested in observing Claudine's feeling upon this side of the matter, she was far too wise to press her upon it, and it was with some little hesitation that she presently asked her what was the true motive of her leaving the castle.

'Bertram would have had me wed him for the second time, and I would not ; yet I know that this was not all ; for I was not content with my life, and was glad to change

it. Why was it that I could not rest content in the place where I had been so happy ?

Sister Rachel smiled with perfect understanding, for she knew the restless fancies which will take possession of young minds ; and she knew far better than Claudine, how impossible it is that any womanly nature can find satisfaction in the course of life, which is filled with no higher objects than mere childish pleasure.

'Sister,' said Claudine shyly, after a pause, 'you have lived here long, have you not ?'

'It is now twenty-six years.'

'But have you never wearied ? I feel weary near to death even now.'

'I have felt so in the past time,' replied the sister, looking down at her with frank and kindly eyes, 'but not for long. I am happy now, and live here in full content.'

'But how ?' said Claudine. 'Oh, it is because you are so pious and good.'

'It is because I have given myself here to the service of heaven, and the poor, who were left to us by Christ,' answered the nun gravely.

'Is it that all the sick you tend in the hospital, and the children that you love so well, have made you content here ?' asked Claudine.

'In part, yes.'

Claudine looked all around her, as though wondering whether such things as these would ever suffice to make that conventual stillness tolerable to her, and cast down her eyes again in dissatisfied sadness. The place still looked to her lonely and dreary, and the cheerful twitter of a bird overhead seemed little in accordance with it.

'When first I came hither,' said Sister Rachel slowly, 'the convent seemed to me as a prison, even as it seems now to you, and sorely did I dread and grieve for the long years that lay before me here ; but it was, indeed, in the service I could render to the sick and poor that the sadness left me first. I have found other happiness since.'

Claudine looked up with the trouble of a new and disturbing idea dawning in her face.

‘Do you think that all women should do as you have done?’ she asked apprehensively; ‘should all resign the world, and the freedom of the outer life, and give themselves to religion and charity, like you?’

‘That can scarcely be,’ replied the sister, with a smile; ‘nay, child, but I would have charity and religion make their home in the world.’

‘I half dreaded lest you should tell me that I myself should take the veil,’ said Claudine, with a sigh of relief.

‘And if I had said it?’ asked the nun, a little amused at the absolute confidence with which Claudine seemed to hang upon her words.

‘I should have known that all you could say must be right and true, and yet I think I never could do that.’

‘It is little thou canst yet know of what may come to pass,’ replied the sister kindly, ‘but I should grieve, indeed, to see any maiden take the vows upon her in a spirit of reluctant dread, and it may well be that it is in the outer world thy future lot is to be cast. Now I must loiter here no longer, for there is much to do.’

CHAPTER XXX.

CLAUDINE, left alone, continued to walk in the garden for some time longer, idly plucking daisies and tearing them to pieces in her thoughtful mood, as though she sought to wreak upon them some feelings of spite or vexation, which different causes had stirred within her. Presently she began to sing softly to herself, and some half-fancied link of association led her to choose a plaintive ballad, which told of the wanderings of a deserted cavalier, who travelled through many countries in search of his lost lady. The words and air, heard long ago, seemed to haunt her memory with a strange fascination that day; and when Babette came out by-and-by to seek her, she found her still crooning over the old ditty, as she sat on the ground with hands clasped round her knee, dreamily watching the labours of the busy ants at her feet.

'Why, Lady Claudine,' exclaimed the serving-woman, 'is it thus that you will expose yourself and brown your face, with your head bare, too, to the scorching sun?' Many a one have I heard of that has met death by such means.'

'Have they, Babette?' said Claudine, rising absently; 'never mind it, I will come in now.'

From the day on which Claudine had first sought a lesson in needlework from her attendants, she continued to pursue it with some industry, if rather fitfully. By degrees, as she began to find such occupations less irksome than she had supposed them, she wished to learn the mysteries of other female accomplishments, in which Margery had, indeed, often tried to instruct her, but owing to the want of any willing application in her pupil, with very little success. Sister Rachel, glad to see this new desire for occupation, which she thought sprang from a healthy and natural instinct, cheerfully allowed Claudine to assist her in the compounding of her simples, or attendance on the sick, so far as she was able; and took some pains to instruct her in arts, the knowledge of which was so essential to a lady, and, as she thought, in itself so useful.

Claudine learned with a ready intelligence, and loved the occupations to which the sister introduced her, far better than the more tranquil labours which she still pursued with Babette; for, having found unexpected solace in the employment of her time, she soon threw into these new pursuits all the energy which had hitherto found an outlet only in her restless fancies, and benefited in many ways by the change. Louise soon ceased to regard with contempt the productions of Claudine's needle, which came in time as far to excel her own, as even mechanical work, directed by a quick and intelligent mind, must always excel that of an inferior one.

The two women, remembering her former tastes, watched with suppressed smiles the earnestness with which she strove to turn the spinning-wheel, and the deep interest which she lent to the acquirement of any other art which Babette could teach her; and Claudine was not

long before she began to experience something of the soothing attraction, which such pursuits have for almost all women, whatever their degree. They helped to calm and beguile her fretful despondency, and while filling her time usefully, brought her more of a feeling of settled content than she had known before, in happier circumstances than those which surrounded her now. It surprised herself to see how deft and skilful her fingers grew; and she remembered with a smile how inexpert and embarrassed she had been, when desired by her aunt to display her skill in needlework. She would have felt less dread of such an ordeal now.

But chiefly still, Claudine was pleased when Sister Rachel praised her advancement in the arts of nursing and medicine. There was something in the aspect of suffering, and a charm in the power of relieving it, which appealed, not vainly, to all her youthful compassion; and this work, too, kept her beside the sister, to whom she was learning to cling more and more closely. The patients upon whom Sister Rachel bestowed her cares, were sometimes from among the inmates of the convent, and often from the peasants in its vicinity who came to seek a charitable asylum; and it is probable that they suffered less under her simple remedies and gentle tendance, than they might have done from the rough treatment of the more professed surgeons of that time. She, at least, was troubled with no misgivings as to the efficacy and happy results of her practice; and all the other sisters looked upon her powers in this respect with an admiring confidence, which could never have admitted a single doubt upon it.

Claudine found another recreation for herself, of a kind dreamy enough, but which served in some measure to relieve the too mechanical nature of the only employments offered to her. She had often listened to those exhibitions of skill in which minstrels and even gentlemen were then used to engage, of extemporaneous compositions in poetry and music: and sometimes while bending over her needle alone, she endeavoured to cast her thoughts and fancies into something like an imitation of

these performances. In such attempts, the result of her natural desire to express herself more freely than she could do in any other way, it was not likely she could succeed; and she soon found that the difficulties to be met in this art, of which there was no one to explain to her the first principles, were greater than any she had had to contend with in spinning or embroidery. This exercise, however, at least afforded her some mental distraction; and the fruitless effort soon fell into the mere recalling to her memory of the long romances, and the rude old ballads and legends, which had often amused her in former days. It was surprising how many of these now came back to her, wholly or in part; and she added to them not only some few learned for the first time from her attendants, but also many of the chants and choruses she had heard in the chapel, unintelligible though they were. All these she would sing over softly to herself by the hour together as she sat alone, and they served to distract many hours, which would otherwise have been melancholy as well as lonely.

It is likely that there was some thought of Bertram underlying all this; and indeed he occupied more of Claudine's mind at this time than anyone suspected, and she thought of him always as her future defence and deliverer. In all the visions of the future which she framed in her solitary hours, and they were many enough, after the fashion of very young maidens, she always saw their lots again united; for the girl, thrown so much upon herself, and finding coldness where she had looked only for cherishing indulgence, turned naturally and tenderly to recollection of the home, in which she had never met with anything but the fondest consideration.

This was not exactly the effect which the Prioress expected and wished to produce, in her attempt to control her niece; but she had fallen into the error, not unnatural in those accustomed to the exercise of any degree of power, of over-rating her own influence. She imagined that she had not only succeeded in attracting Claudine's affection to herself; but in establishing such an ascendancy over her, that she could not fail in the end to

overcome any difficulties which might threaten to interfere with her wishes. Observing Claudine far more closely than she ever allowed it to appear, she pleased herself by thinking that the aversion to her cousin the Baron became a little less marked; and she was not sorry to see the cloud of dejection which now seemed to have fallen upon her niece. The lady was not unacquainted either with the manner in which Claudine now employed so much of her time; but of pursuits so useful it was not likely that she should disapprove, and she remained for some time in the hope that her projects were in a fair way of being in the end realised.

In this way was passed the summer and autumn of that year; until Claudine began to grow very weary of the enforced monotony of the life she was now leading, however she might seek to relieve it by various employments. Sister Rachel, though always a kind and useful friend, had little time to devote to her; and she could not find much satisfaction in the constant companionship of Babette and Louise. She would have been well pleased to vary her life by occasionally venturing beyond the convent walls, on foot or horseback, into the immediately surrounding country; but the desire of her aunt that she should remain constantly within them had been so plainly expressed, that she could only pace round and round the half-neglected herb-garden, which grew more desolate in its aspect from day to day, as the later autumn drew gradually on. She often wondered, as she watched the nuns living on to all appearance calmly, and not unhappily, in the monotonous round of their existence, how they could bear so tranquilly the knowledge, that not for a short time only, but through many succeeding years, through the whole course of their future lives, they must be bound and confined within the narrow convent limits. Was it possible that among all those women, some, not by many years her elders, knew nothing of the restless longings, the hatred of that secluded place, which troubled herself so often?

The Prioress had waited very patiently for the fitting occasion to renew her efforts, in a matter which she had

so much at heart as the dissolution of Claudine's contract with Bertram de Drumont; but the response of her niece to some indirect hints which she had lately given upon this subject, had been such as to render her rather more anxious as to the final accomplishment of her wishes; and this, with some other considerations, decided her that the time was now come when it would be well to speak to Claudine a little more plainly upon the views and projects she had formed for her.

Accordingly Claudine was one day sent for by her aunt, who began the conversation by asking her, in a somewhat serious and stately manner, whether she had now better considered the subject, upon which she had regretted to find her so undutifully obstinate upon a former occasion.

Claudine, a little startled by this suddenly renewed assault, replied with a simple negative; looking at her aunt with an expression of entreaty which seemed to beg that she would not continue to urge her upon this point.

'I should be sorry,' said the Prioress coldly, 'if by childish perverseness you should put in peril the best interests of your future; and therefore it is that I had hoped to see you more ready to submit to the desire of one who can have your welfare alone at heart, and to whom you surely owe some duty and reverence. My child,' she continued in a more affectionate tone, 'my judgment is riper, my experience wider, than yours; and I know what in this matter is right and fitting to be done. Methinks that I have left you space long enough for reflection; and I desire that you will now take this pen and subscribe the parchment, which I have before shown to you.'

Claudine was not so free from her aunt's influence that she found it easy to remain standing in her place instead of yielding obedience to this summons, or to sustain her glance while she conveyed, though in half-faltering tones and with scrupulous respect, her unchanging refusal.

'This grieves me,' said the Prioress slowly and in a low tone, after a pause which seemed to Claudine portentous in its length; 'the more so as I have received but lately the offer of another alliance for you, in all respects so honourable and desirable, that no hindrance can lie in the way of its

happy fulfilment, save this baby contract, to which some unreasoning sentiment, which I pretend not to understand, would lead you to cling. Have you no wish to learn,' she went on, finding that Claudine made no reply, but by the half-alarmed questioning look she directed towards her, 'who it is that has done you this honour? I speak of your cousin, the Baron de Raston, to whom I have already expressed my full approval of his suit, and pledged myself to lend it my aid. A girlish scruple cannot be allowed to interfere with a settlement so advantageous for you.'

'The Baron de Raston!' exclaimed Claudine, at last finding voice in the midst of her surprise; 'you will not, you cannot wish me to wed with him? He is the only man I have ever seen of whom I have felt an actual dread.'

'I had thought, Claudine,' said the Prioress, with a little impatience, 'that you were at least free from childish fears, which have no real foundation. I thought that I had succeeded in disabusing your mind of the foolish tales, which had been instilled into it to my nephew's prejudice.'

'I have no less fear of him now than at first,' answered Claudine in a low tone.

'In very truth, niece, you are ill to please in these matters; neither do I find it easy to divine whither your own desires would tend. You have left the husband to whom you were at first affianced, and come hither to claim my protection; yet when I seek to release you from the bonds you then refused to ratify, I meet with nought but rebellion and resistance from you. I now propose to you a second union, in every way befitting your station, and you affect a feminine cowardice and unreasoning distaste, under cover of which you would reject this also. And yet, as far as I am able to read your future, the only prospect which lies before you, as with other maidens, is a choice between marriage and the cloister; and for the holy vocation you have ever expressed to me feelings of something more than aversion.'

Claudine, in such reverential terms as she thought

best suited to please her aunt, entreated that she might be allowed to return to the castle of the Baron de Drumont; to whom she would now, she said, most willingly be given in marriage.

‘You have told me,’ replied her aunt, drawing up her small spare figure with all the haughtiness which belonged no less to the elderly gentlewoman, than to the head of a large religious establishment, ‘that the Baron de Drumont will be not unwilling to dissolve the union which binds you together. That being so, I know not how it can be possible for you now to ask that it may be confirmed; neither can I ever consent that my niece should so far forget what is due to her maiden dignity, as to return to his gates as a suppliant, and sue for the renewal of a tie, which he would fain see altogether broken. You seem well assured that the young Baron can as yet have formed no views which might conflict with that older claim; but what guaranty have we that you shall still be unforgotten?’

The girl had been standing with fingers nervously entwined, and hot and deepening colour in her cheeks, striving desperately to keep back the tears which pride would not suffer her to allow to appear; but at the conclusion of her aunt’s words she looked up and spoke with some spirit, saying that she had known Bertram too well to believe anything of what her aunt had just hinted.

‘He is too kind and too loyal,’ she said, ‘to have forgotten so readily either me or the pledges, which bind him at least until they are sundered.’

The Prioress smiled, with that touch of irony which Claudine had always thought so especially unpleasant, and answered:

‘I had scarcely thought to find my niece so accomplished in the knowledge of mankind; but the question is not now of the virtues of the Baron de Drumont, but of my nephew’s suit.’

‘I could not,’ murmured Claudine.

‘On this point, Claudine, I will not reason further with you now,’ said her aunt gravely. ‘I will not tell you of the many advantages which must arise to you from an

alliance such as this. I will not tell you of the honours and splendour, the gay and gallant show, the goodly castles and estates, which must fall to the lot of the lady of Armand de Raston ; for these things are nought but worldly vanity, which I would not have you too greatly regard. Neither will I speak of the devotion and tenderness which my nephew is prepared to lay at your feet ; of the loyal service which will be yours through life ; or of the noble, knightly name with which he thus offers to invest you ; for in all these matters I leave him to urge his own suit. I will not even say how dear to my own heart is the prospect of such a union, and how gladly I would aid to join the hands of two, who stand in so close relationship to myself. All these considerations, I would fain hope, will exert their due influence upon your mind when it is more capable of calm reflection ; but it is my desire, my command, that you should now, this very hour, take the first step in signing the document, by which I seek to set you free to entertain such proposals.'

A pause followed, during which the Prioress kept her eyes fixed, firmly and coldly, upon her niece's face ; but Claudine had never before encountered from those eyes such a flash of anger, as fell upon her on the repetition of her refusal. Without a word the lady signed to the girl to leave her, and Claudine quitted her presence.

A dark cloud lingered upon the brow of the Prioress for some time after her niece had left her ; while her thoughts dwelt upon the annoyance and perplexity which Claudine's unlooked-for resolution had occasioned. Such determined opposition to her will on the part of a girl so young, whom she had thought it would be an easy task to influence and control, was almost more than she could comprehend ; and her mind was certainly more engaged upon these things that day, than upon any of the responsibilities of her sacred office.

Claudine had hurried at once to her own chamber, where she alarmed Babette by giving free vent, in a storm of sobs, to the emotions she had hitherto struggled to repress. There was something of the vague terror with which Armand de Raston had always inspired her,

mingled with the wounded pride and anger, and the sense of desolation, which all overcame her in that moment. It seemed to her as though she were left helpless in the hands of her aunt and of this man. Now that she stood no longer in the presence of the Prioress, all her girlish courage and determination broke down; and she cried and stormed, resisting all attempts at consolation, more like the spoiled child of long ago, than anything her attendants had seen for years. Babette could do nothing but watch her in wonder, until the tempest had passed over of itself, and Claudine had grown calmer.

‘Lady Claudine, will you not tell me now what has moved you so?’ said the woman when she saw that her young lady was tranquil.

‘Do not question me, Babette,’ replied Claudine, with a touch of dignity; for she was learning more discretion in her speech than formerly, and this woman was not one in whom she would have chosen to confide.

If Claudine’s position had been one of neglect before, it now speedily became something more, while at the same time its loneliness increased; for Sister Rachel had received an intimation that their constant association was not agreeable to the Superior, and could now no longer find opportunity for more than a few hurried words, or an encouraging glance. The Prioress, moreover, found shortly, what had never occurred to her before, that the attendance of two women was quite superfluous for her niece, and Babette was accordingly removed from her present position, although not from the convent; for the lady saw so many prudential reasons against her departure at this time, that she thought fit to retain her about her own person. Louise, on the other hand, was still left with her lady, perhaps because the Prioress judged, whether rightly or wrongly, that a young and light-spirited girl would be likely to weary the soonest of the tedious sameness of her present way of life; and to use all her influence to persuade Claudine to escape from it by the readiest means in her power, which was surely compliance with the wishes of her aunt.

Neither was the poor child long in discovering how

great was the power of annoyance and repression, which her aunt could exert ; till, as a refuge from frequent grave lectures, penances, and unpalatable reproofs, complete solitude would have seemed, not only tolerable, but desirable. Claudine was now required to pass long hours in the prayers, which were prescribed to her as a religious duty. Though the occasion of this marked change had never been distinctly avowed, the Prioress never seemed at a loss for some colourable cause of displeasure against her niece ; but Claudine well understood in what manner she had given offence, and what must be the terms of her restoration to favour. Indeed, never before had she been placed in a position of such restraint and subjection ; and all the pride she had drawn, as well from nature as from education, rose against it in a storm of inward indignation, which her aunt was far from appreciating. The proud reserve of early youth repressed all outward manifestation of it, where it could only be unavailing ; and the Superior, who had been accustomed for years to the management of women so used to regulation and constraint as to have learned to wear their fetters lightly, had nothing in her experience, which could have aided her to understand the impulses of a mind so entirely unaccustomed to control.

Armand de Raston still continued to pay his occasional visits ; yet, though the soft smiles and flattering speeches with which he always came prepared formed a contrast to the coldness she encountered elsewhere, Claudine still shrank from him ; and the Prioress would probably have had better prospects of ultimate success without the influence of his presence.

Claudine passed through that winter in a state of alternate depression and excitement, which might have had worse effects but for the resource afforded by her needlework, of which she now found the full value. In this, and in wandering alone round the wintry garden, where there was little verdure or vegetation left, the chief part of her solitary time was now passed ; and in the company of Louise, who, though a somewhat vain and giddy girl, was really attached to her young mistress, and

tried to do all she could to cheer and distract her, the weeks passed slowly by. Though all this time Claudine never lost sight of her idea of constant loyalty to Bertram ; indeed, she clung to it yet more closely, and was well-pleased to allow Louise to chatter continually of the old life in the castle, of the young Baron himself, and of all else which surrounded it—themes on which the waiting-maiden was no less pleased to dilate, for, cut off as she was from objects of present interest, she threw herself very naturally with double avidity on the past.

The Prioress had not judged wisely in her dealings with her niece, and all that she did seemed to be productive of the very opposite effect to that which she had intended. Not that she suspected this ; she did not doubt her own power, and would have been surprised to learn how little influence she really possessed over Claudine. She was a little disposed to exaggerate the effect of her own condescension, but mistaken in supposing that she had succeeded in winning her niece's heart, by a few months of caressing flatteries, followed by a yet longer period of neglect and unkindness. Claudine regarded her at least with dislike, and felt none of that anxiety for a return of the old patronage and kindness, upon which her aunt had counted for assistance.

Thus passed two months to all outward appearance aimlessly enough ; yet, throughout the time a purpose was gradually forming in the girl's mind, which was to bear fruit at no distant day.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BERTRAM DE DRUMONT was making preparation for a journey in the cold, gray light of an early morning. Not, as it seemed, for a military expedition, for neither the numbers of the train which accompanied him, nor the character of their equipment, well accorded with such a purpose ; and yet indications were not wanting that the occasion was a particular one.

It was one of the latest days of winter, and the weather, though mild, was wet and gloomy, the rain falling with such still and steady persistence, as seemed to forbid all hope of clearer skies for many hours at least. The horses, when fairly started upon their road, sank deep in soft mud at every step they took; while their riders were so bespattered that, at the end of an hour or two's ride, they had all the appearance of having performed a long and toilsome journey.

Bertram's countenance was no less overcast than the morning. His whole bearing, indeed, was so moody and reserved throughout this day, that his followers, unaccustomed to fits of capricious sullenness in him, were not a little at a loss to account for a humour, which nothing in the present occasion seemed to justify. Yet this melancholy was not without its cause, and, if some degree of resentment mingled with it, that also, in his own opinion at least, had some just foundation. It was, in fact, but the evening before, that he had received a despatch from the Superior of the Convent of St. Agnes, requesting his concurrence in the application she wished to make, for the dissolution of his marriage—a demand which disturbed him not a little, and the more so as it came unaccompanied by any message or token from Claudine herself, who might at least, he thought, have accorded some parting words.

Saddened though he was by this communication, for he had unconsciously looked to her return rather with certainty than hope, he was yet more disquieted by a rumour, which had also reached his ears, that the Baron de Raston was very ready to step forward as a pretender to her hand, when it should be set at liberty. Bertram was not ignorant of the repute of this cavalier, and fumed with inward indignation upon this unwelcome report. The whole subject was indeed so exceedingly distasteful to him, that he had postponed all attention to it, until his return from the journey he had already purposed for the morrow.

These thoughts engaged the young Baron throughout the whole of that February day; and so deeply that the

slow and fatiguing progress, induced by the unfavourable nature of the weather and the ground, appeared to breed him little annoyance. At length, however, when the dusk of evening was beginning to fade into darkness, and it became necessary to provide some shelter for the night, he roused himself, and sent a messenger forward to request hospitality at a castle, which stood beside the way, and appeared the last human habitation for a long distance. Admission was here granted with a cordial readiness, which was reflected in the greeting of the *Châtelain* as he stepped forward to receive Bertram with more of the warmth of old friendship than the courtesy usually accorded to a stranger. He was an old knight, whose scanty white locks hung low over a scarred and sunburned forehead, with a frame which had lost much of its original power and vigour, though still upright and active.

'You are welcome, thrice welcome here, my lord,' he said, grasping the hand of his guest with genuine kindness; 'it is not as a stranger that the Baron de Drumont crosses this threshold. I have heard of you, my lord; yes, I have heard of you, and in former days—in my war-like days—I have known your father, too.'

'I owe you cordial thanks, sir,' replied Bertram, 'for so kindly a welcome, and rejoice to meet in you one of my father's companions in arms. Were it not that I fear I may in something incommode you,' he hinted, observing that the castle was small, and apparently of scant accommodation.

'Now, by the soul of good fellowship,' said the old Knight, as he conducted Bertram into the interior of the building, 'I would that every day I might be incommoded thus! It is not often, my lord, that I now can taste the pleasure of receiving an honoured guest in this poor hall; yet it has rung with mirth and revel many a night in days gone by. But I am old, and, now mine ancient friends are dead, there are few of the young gallants who care to make revel round an old man's hearth. Will it please you to sit? and they shall serve us with supper. Pauline,' he added, addressing a waiting-woman who stood

at the lower end of the hall, 'go, summon thy lady hither, that she, too, may pay her welcome. I marvel that she is not here ere now; but she has heard the sounds of arrival doubtless, and would pay her courtesies first to her mirror, the way of all women. Louis, go thou to see that they take due order for the lodging of the followers of the Baron; and see that they be well lodged, look you, and well entertained, if you would have favour of me. I would not have you think, because your young master is gone from among us, that there is no eye to note whether all is fitly ordered here. My lord, I bethink me that I have not discovered my name and style, but leave you, as it may be, in wonder. Nerveau—Roland de Nerveau—it is; a name which has gained honour, sir, if not renown—a man need not take shame to bear it.'

'No, in truth,' answered Bertram, with an irrepressible smile. 'I would not have you think, my kind and honoured host, that your name, which, indeed, I had already half divined, is strange to me. I have heard it spoken too often with credit, believe me, to forget it so lightly.'

At this moment a lady entered, followed by an aged attendant; and the *Sieur de Nerveau* hastened to present her to his young guest as his daughter—his only child, he added, with a sorrowful emphasis. Bertram saw a young and beautiful woman, dressed with a simplicity, which showed her to far better advantage than elaborate ornaments could have done. Her fair, calm face was of a type not very common among her countrywomen; and her manner displayed a retiring grace, very womanly and winning.

'You are very welcome, my lord,' said the lady *Blanche*, as she acknowledged Bertram's courtly reverence; 'but that my father has already told you in better terms than I. I can but regret that we may afford you no better entertainment than you are like to meet with.'

'I shall never seek for better, madam,' he answered, 'than the gentle hospitality that I find here.'

The lady inclined her head and moved on; while Bertram stood gazing after her in a momentary forget-

fulness, from which the voice of his host quickly aroused him. As they sat at supper the Knight did not cease to absorb so much of Bertram's attention as a rather pre-occupied mind could give, and presently asked, though not without an apology for his directness, what was the purpose of his present journey.

'I go to Paris,' was the reply, 'to pay my homage to the King, which, indeed, is due; for I have not been to pay my court since his succession.'

'Why, this is somewhat late, is it not?' said his host.

'It is true,' replied Bertram; 'but there were many respects which have prevented me till now.'

'I have been to the court of late,' said the *Sieur de Nerveau*, laughing, as he hewed off great pieces of the smoking meat which loaded his trencher; 'and by my soul I was like to have laughed in the very presence to see a child upon the throne of the great Philip; yet it is a pretty boy, too, but we must not look, my young guest, for the old days to come again. Have you ever looked upon the great King in person? But no, you are too young.'

'I have seen him, sir,' answered Bertram. 'It is now, as I think, four years since.'

'You saw him but in age, young man; ah! if you had but known him in his younger days, then, indeed, might you say that you had seen the King. Well, well, the years have flown with all of us, and the same years which have stolen away from my limbs their strength and hardihood, have robbed him of life, and France of her glory. Well, my lord, as I have told you, I have been known to your noble father long since; but there is more than that, for I am well known to your brother, too.'

'Craving your pardon,' said Bertram, a little surprised, 'I know not how that may be, since brother I never had.'

'It is your kinsman, my father would say,' explained the lady, addressing him for the second time, in tones which seemed to him to fall upon the ear with peculiar sweetness.

'Right, right, it is very true,' cried the Knight; 'and

indeed, my lord, I should have known that he was but your kinsman, for he is the elder, as I judge, by ten years, at the least. Gaspard Gaston, ay, Sir Gaston de Drumont it is, and now that I recollect, he must be son to my old friend, William de Drumont, whose bones we left behind us in Palestine, I know not how many years since ; it is more than I can count, however. By the holy Cross, I have not thought upon that passage these ten years. He was stricken through the breast by one of those accursed pagan flying darts, in the last fight before we left the Holy Land. We bore him out from the press among us, and when he returned to himself a little, he began swearing in so vigorous a fashion, that I verily thought he would have stood it out ; but he failed again for all that, and we left him behind under the sands, as I said before. But now I have had great pleasure in seeing his son, for son he must surely be ; for it is a gallant and courteous gentleman, and I hold myself truly his debtor, that he has been ready to give so many hours to cheering the loneliness of an old man, who can ill-requite his courtesy.'

Bertram heard this address in silence, with a vague sense of dissatisfaction upon thus unexpectedly finding his cousin so well known, and, as it appeared, so much valued there. Yet there appeared to be no reason why this circumstance should give him any displeasure, and he forgot it in the soon returning reflections upon his former anxieties. These thoughts kept him in a more silent and serious mood than seemed to accord with the pleasure of the worthy Knight, who said to him at last :

'It is a good and gleeful custom, my lord, that cavaliers should vie with each other in song over the wine-cup ; and though I cannot, at my years, challenge you in my own person to the contest, it would greatly pleasure me to hear some mirthful chorus, again ringing back from these long-silent walls.'

The young guest looked up hastily, intending to excuse himself from such a trial, for whatever skill he might have in this knightly diversion, he was too dispirited to wish to display it at that time ; but the lady anticipating the denial, which she perceived him about to utter, said,

turning upon him an entreating glance, before which he yielded at once :

‘I would bring my voice in aid of my father’s entreaty, did I think you could deny him this grace. It is a greater, perchance, than you dream of.’

‘I have scarce heard one strain of music,’ pursued the *Sieur de Nerveau*, ‘since the time—but it serves us nothing to think on that now. I have heard none, as I said, for this many a day, unless it be from my old minstrel, whose voice grows shrill and piping as the marsh-fowl, though he knows it not; and by my faith I think I know all his rondels and romances something better than himself. You will truly pleasure me, my lord.’

‘Then do I pleasure myself likewise,’ replied *Bertram*, with courteous readiness ; and after a moment’s hesitation he chose an air which seemed in harmony with his own saddened mood, yet not touching too nearly on the occasion of it ; and sang a mournful lamentation for the death of *Roland*, which described, not without some touches of genuine pathos, the fall and death of the warrior ; and the desolation which spread over his silent halls and grief-stricken vassals, and throughout the kingdom of France itself, for the loss of so redoubted a champion. Something of a saddening influence which seemed, he knew not why, to hang about that place, if it were not in the feelings that swayed his own mind, caused *Bertram* to dwell with peculiar effect upon the wailing complaints of this old romantic elegy, till it seemed to echo from every corner of the hall, in tones as mournful as a funeral dirge. At the conclusion of the long string of stanzas, half sung, half recited, *Bertram* saw with some surprise that the lady, bending her head low, was almost unable to restrain her tears, while even his host brushed away a drop or two in haste, and sat with a deep shadow of gravity overclouding his lately smiling countenance.

‘’Tis her brother,’ said the old Knight, seeing his guest half startled by the unexpected emotion he had awakened. ‘It is my gallant son whose doom you have so brought

back to us to-night, Sir Baron, that I marvel not at all the simple maid should weep. Ah! my young guest, you can know nothing of the desolation in which an old man stands, who has lost the prop which should sustain his feet. He has left me no less drear and cheerless than these half-empty halls, robbed, as you see them, of half their strength, and all their merriment.'

Moved by the melancholy earnestness with which the old man spoke, Bertram was silent for some moments, until, turning towards the Lady Blanche, he gently expressed his regret that he should unwittingly have revived a distressful remembrance.

'All tears spring not from pain, my lord,' she answered softly. 'Neither did I find distress in the subject of your song. I thank you, rather.'

The Sieur de Nerveau, with a visible effort, strove now to shake off the gloom which had for a moment overmastered him, and said, with a return of his former manner :

'It was scarce dealing fairly by us, my lord, to give us lamentations, in place of one of those joyous ditties, with which I thought the heads of all young cavaliers to be packed as close as a pedlar's wallet ; yet I give you no less thanks, for 'twas a noble song, if a sad one.'

'I would readily amend it with a gayer,' said Bertram, 'if I might so restore your cheer, my gentle host.'

'No, no,' replied the old man, shaking his head with an attempt at a smile ; 'and methinks the blithest airs would make me think more upon Roland this night than doleful dirges ; for he sang us many a merry carol, did he not, Blanche ? But we hear no blithe music now.'

Again abruptly changing the theme of his discourse, the Knight continued to converse more cheerfully, until at length, and somewhat later than her custom, the lady rose to withdraw. Bertram made brief answer to her few graceful words of leave-taking, but followed her with his eyes as she retired, and stood so long in reverie that he turned with a half-start when his host, laying a heavy hand upon his shoulder, said earnestly :

‘I trust, my lord, that you will do me more grace than to quit me again with the break of day, as your first purpose was. Your occasions do not surely call upon you with so much urgency, that you may not snatch a few days to cheer the heart of a lonely old man.’

‘Why, indeed,’ replied Bertram hesitatingly, ‘I am already something late, as you told me but now, in paying the duty that should call me hence.’

‘So late, my young friend,’ said De Nerveau, with a smile, ‘may well enough be later. I would that my tongue could urge it as strongly as my heart does ; for you know not how it cheers and gladdens me to see again a guest, and a young and noble guest, seated beside my cold hearth. You cannot know what it is to feel the sorrowful eyes of the dead gazing upon you from each empty corner, and to hear dead voices sounding through the silence. Tell me only that you will remain to give life to the old castle for yet a little while, for charity, my lord.’

‘My kind and honoured host,’ answered Bertram, grasping warmly the hand which the old man extended to him, ‘if I can pleasure you in so light a thing, it were indeed the part of a churl to deny you ; so never speak of charity in the matter. I remain, then, most gladly at your bidding, and with cordial thanks for your good-will and courtesy.’

It was matter of some secret satisfaction to Bertram that, in thus delaying the course of his journey, he delayed also the time when it would be necessary to act upon the communication received from the convent ; for he felt so strong a sense of uneasiness upon this subject, that any means of postponement seemed welcome. The thought of Claudine, however, was not quite so vividly present with him when he lay down that night, as it had been throughout the day ; for the new ideas which had been presented to his mind within the last few hours not unnaturally cast it a little into the background ; and the fair face of the Lady Blanche seemed to hover before his mental sight with an almost teasing pertinacity, presenting to him again every varying shade of expression he had seen upon it. All the

more, perhaps, because her words had been few, and those of general character, did the recollection press upon him ; and he was himself surprised to find how faithfully his memory could recall every peculiarity of face and figure : for through all his converse with her father he had never withdrawn his silent observation from her. The image, though unsummoned, was not unwelcome, nor did he seek to banish it ; yet it was not in the power of either pleasing, or unpleasing, thoughts to keep sleep away from him for any length of time—a sleep in which pleasure and anxiety were both alike forgotten.

Bertram soon found that it was no easy matter to escape from the kindly importunities of his host ; who never ceased to press his further stay with so much urgency, upon each fresh proposal of departure, during the next few days, that his young guest at length determined that a little time might be lost here without any ill-consequence—a decision taken the more readily, because he felt his fortune had guided him to no unpleasant halting-place. He never sought for the reason which made him content to linger ; but remained from day to day without impatience nevertheless, greatly to the surprise, and scarcely less to the annoyance, of those who attended him ; for they found little to attract in the simple routine of life in this retired castle. Accustomed to a more ample display of magnificence and hospitality, they looked, indeed, with something like contempt upon the more contracted means and less numerous household of the *Sieur de Nerveau* ; and being worse lodged and entertained than their master, and desirous one and all of arriving as speedily as might be at the court, their impatience soon ripened into discontent, which could be expressed in no other way than by murmurings among themselves ; or perhaps in some open scoffing and more half-veiled contempt, levelled against the new associates among whom they were thrown. These, however, as pleased as their master with the fresh society which chance had brought to their doors, were so discreetly blind and deaf as to show little or no resentment, even upon open affronts ; thereby winning to themselves still

more of the contempt of their unwilling guests. Yet the constant deference shown to them had its success, after the first few days, in restoring to the scornful and dissatisfied followers of the Baron de Drumont some portion of their good-humour ; and they found a little entertainment in inventing the most marvellous tales of the prodigies they had accomplished, the wonders they had seen, and the strange chances they had endured, in that wider sphere of action, which was known only by report to many of their auditors—tales which were devoured with eager curiosity and awe by the simplest members of the household, but secretly laughed at by the more experienced, who nevertheless counterfeited admiration so well, as to produce constant recitals of new marvels, to prolong their amusement.

The gratification of the old Knight in entertaining a guest who would bear him company in all the sports and pleasures which his means afforded, or declining years permitted him to enjoy, was so great that Bertram could not but feel some pleasure in humouring him ; yet it was only when the Lady Blanche expressed by a few words and a smile, half sad, half radiant, her satisfaction at his continued sojourn there, that that pleasure was complete.

‘ You give new life to my father, my lord,’ she said ; ‘ your coming has been like that of a freshening breeze in the heat of a sultry day. It is long since I have seen him so light of heart as now.’

He made no distinct answer ; it was, indeed, seldom that he could easily find words in which to speak to her ; but he lingered as often as possible beside her, not to converse, but to look and listen ; for the mere tones of her voice seemed to attract him strangely, though she, too, spoke but seldom. Her grace and apparent sweetness captivated him as well ; and he was quite content to stand aside and watch, without even wishing for more familiar intercourse.

Little time, indeed, was left to Bertram for private converse with the lady ; for he must attend her father almost constantly on foot or on horseback during the day ; and at night must listen patiently to his conversation, or

assist to divert him with music; in which attempt, with the assistance of one of the squires who accompanied him, he met with no mean success. The old Knight never again showed any tokens of such deep despondency, as he had done upon the first evening, speaking more of the course of his earlier life than of any recent events which had troubled it; and it was not without interest that Bertram listened, when he told of long-past warlike adventures, in which he had borne a share, and especially when mention was made of his father's name; for the *Sieur de Nervcau* was very willing to enlarge upon—even, perhaps, a little to exaggerate—his former connection with the *Baron de Drumont*, when he saw that the circumstance gave pleasure to his guest. Bertram in the meantime had banished from his mind all the thoughts of *Claudine*, and their mutual connection, which had perplexed and troubled him on the day of his arrival; that was a matter which called for consideration hereafter, not now.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN that time which seems to stand as a kind of border-land between the spring and winter, there are sometimes days of a peculiar softness and charm; more restful, and with less of the stir and bustle of reviving nature than any which the later season brings. The sun appears, on such days, to shine down upon the still half-sleeping world, with beams of peculiar kindness; as though thinking his most cherishing care is needful to pour heart and life into all its inmates, before they are called upon for any new efforts after the harsh trials, to which they have been subject, during the winds and frosts of winter.

It was upon such a day as this that Bertram, by no means unwillingly, found himself pledged to accompany his host upon a hawking party, upon which the old man had set his heart for several days, and had waited only for favourable weather. Not that the falconry of the

Sieur de Nerveau was very abundantly stocked, for his means did not admit of any great display of magnificence; but the personal attention he bestowed upon this subject was so unremitting—for his natural passion for the sport increased tenfold with age, when by increased corpulency and feebleness he became less able for the more laborious exercises of the field—that he proudly boasted the hawks of his training might be matched with any others of their kind in France, and fear nothing by the comparison. He observed to Bertram, indeed, upon this morning, that the only matter for which he could find it in his heart to envy the state of a king, was the noble collection of falcons, which he had more than once seen at the court.

Bertram was gratified to find that the Lady Blanche intended joining the party upon this morning; and scarcely less so, that she seemed to require not a little of his assistance and attendance throughout the day. He was obliged to ride constantly at her side, for his hand was needed upon her rein at every awkward passage in their way; and later his aid was no less necessary in the management of her hawk, in which art, indeed, she displayed so little skill, as to cause him some surprise. Yet it pleased him to respond to these constant appeals, for a certain fascination seemed to lie for him in this very helplessness, so different from Claudine's ready self-dependence; and he remained always watchful and ready to perform the least service for her, even while he was obliged to listen, or appear to listen, to the discourse of her father, who kept his place on the other side. Bertram was perhaps inclined upon this morning to find the company of his host superfluous, and the degree of attention he was disposed to exact somewhat wearisome; though no indication of such a feeling was suffered to appear in his carefully guarded manner, or in the responses which he was obliged to make, from time to time, to his conversation.

'You see now stretched before you the whole of my estates and holding, my lord,' said the old man, looking around him with an air of real or affected depreciation. 'Poor enough it may well be that they seem in your eyes—

poor and barren—yet, such as they are, it is all that I had from my father ; neither has a life spent amid the toil and din of arms, added one rood of land, or one coin of treasure, to my former store. I thought in my younger days to hew my way upward in the world by valour and merit ; silly dreams ! fortune lies in the smiles of the great, and great men's smiles are to be won by favour, not by merit. But, as you may see, my young friend, I did never learn the road to that favour, and I must be fain to end life as I began it, with nought beyond the barren lands, and scanty following, which my father swayed before me.'

'By my faith, sir !' answered Bertram, who had heard speeches of this kind before ; 'though it is your pleasure in some things to set lightly by your own belongings, I must even say that I find your fields as fertile and smiling as those of many a greater lordship ; and your little band of vassals not less stout than most. This at least I know, that no belated stranger need ever wish to meet a fairer or a heartier welcome than he may find here.'

The old man looked round him with a dissatisfied air, and shook his head.

'You say these things in your courtesy,' he said ; 'but I know it for a poor and barren heritage, which is all that is left me after long years spent in the tireless pursuit of honour ; and I still look to find you of my mind. Look you, you may pleasure a child, by telling him that his brazen drinking-cup is of pure gold, but not the man, who knows it for the baser metal.'

'If the path of glory be the road to gain,' said Bertram, 'I might perhaps be of your mind, as you say ; but I, though yet a young traveller thereon, had ever thought that they held a different direction.'

'Nay,' replied the Sieur de Nerveau, glancing quickly at him ; 'I would not have you think me possessed with that base desire of gold, which I do, indeed, hold to be shame in all who seek to follow chivalry ; far be such longings from our hearts. But that which irks me, my lord, is to note, as I have noted many a time ere now, with what scant justice this world of ours is wont to

repay those who have lived but to do it service and honour. In these days the love of just dealing may bring little to a man but heaviness, yet have I harboured it from my youth up; and all the turmoil of seventy years has never reft it from me, and thus it is that it frets me even in my age to see impotence and perfidy advanced, or honest merit lie in obscurity.'

Bertram bowed slightly for all answer to this explanation, checking the words which had risen to his lips; but as his host turned aside at this moment to speak with the falconer who followed him, muttered between his teeth, that to his mind, the man who entered the lists to tilt for one prize, had no ground of complaint because another, and a different, guerdon was not awarded him. Whether the lady at his side had heard the remark, he could not guess, in spite of the half-smile which she turned upon him; for she immediately spoke upon another theme. Again, Bertram rode on beside her as though in a dream, mastered by the attraction her voice always held for him, even should it utter the merest commonplaces; and no less filled with content through the long pauses of silence, which she allowed to fall between her words.

It was not a day which seemed fitted for mirth or lively converse; the air of profound and restful quiet which rested upon the whole surrounding scene, appeared as though it imposed a silence only to be broken by some little effort. The very horses' feet trampled with a muffled sound over the half-brown sod; and the voice of the old knight, which was to be heard unceasingly—addressed now to Bertram, now to one or other of his followers; now muttering to himself, now whistling or talking to his falcon—seemed to disturb the silence in much the same way as the loud buzzing of a bee, or some other insect, sounds, with irksome persistence, in a quiet room.

There are sometimes tranquil moments in life when it seems as though it would be most pleasant, could that restless wheel of existence come to a sudden stand, and leave the present hour untouched through all the future years; and this, probably will be no season of vivid enjoyment or intoxicating triumph; but some common

time filled with the peaceful influences of every day, which can give rest to the mind like an untroubled sleep. A fire-light group ; the summer sunshine on broad meadows ; the smiling desolation of late autumn woods ; or the dreamy sweetness of some old poet. This feeling came to Bertram then ; he could willingly have remained for ever by the side of the Lady Blanche upon this ideal morning, on which neither heat nor cold made itself felt, nothing that could rouse the mind to any active perception of outward objects ; for he had been familiar enough with anxiety and exertion of late to feel the charm of that perfect repose. He did not know, nor probably would have found had he sought to know, how great a share that fair companion bore in completing his pleasure ; but it may have been that she was the moving spirit of the whole, and did more than anything else could do, to awaken the half enchanted feeling which possessed him. Only to look at her was enough to occupy him ; and as he gazed he thought, or rather felt unconsciously, that never before had he seen so graceful and beautiful a woman. The gracious kindness of every word and glance which she directed towards him, could only serve to deepen the impression made by her beauty ; and in this way did Bertram pass that morning, like a child playing with the beautiful flames, which yet have power to scorch so cruelly.

The interest of the sport, which claimed his attention, presently recalled Bertram in some degree from the dreams which had filled his mind ; he assisted the lady to fly her falcon as the prey appeared in the air : and as he stood watching the result of the flight, it might have seemed as though his mind had no room for any other sentiment, than the vivid interest, which years of habit and of training, had taught to the sportsman. Lady Blanche followed the direction of his gaze with great apparent earnestness, while her hawk was yet wheeling round in the air ; and watched with attention the protracted struggle which followed between the two birds ; yet when the falcon, descending, brought to her the prey, which had only been secured after a desperate conflict, she turned

aside from it with aversion, and would not look upon, far less touch, the yet warm mass of torn and bleeding feathers, which was, in truth, more than commonly mangled and misused. Bertram was a little surprised at a display of feeling so unusual; but his present frame of mind disposed him to ascribe to impulse of womanly tenderness, what at another time he might have despised as affectation or as cowardice. Taking the hawk in his hand he gently released the prize from its tenacious claws; at the same time caressing and praising the handsome bird till it proudly plumed its ruffled feathers, and looked about with as genuine an air of conscious self-esteem, as ever sat upon a human hunter after hard achievement.

‘See then, lady,’ said he, ‘what a noble prize your falcon brings. He struggled for it, too, and yet you will not look upon it.’

‘The poor bird is so cruelly mangled,’ she replied, without turning her head, ‘and I sicken ever at the sight of blood. Yet you, my lord, handle that mass of crimsoned feathers with as much indifference, as I should gather a rose.’

Bertram looked in astonishment for a moment, and laughed.

‘It would be strange, indeed, if I had seen the blood of men flow so often to blench now at a dead heron,’ and he cast the bird down with a certain contempt; ‘yet the ladies are of gentler nature than we. But I judge if you shrink from such a sight, you can draw little pleasure from a sport like this.’

‘It did never please me,’ replied the lady, ‘and it is long since last I witnessed it.’

‘And yet I have known ladies,’ said Bertram, drawing close beside her, and abandoning, perhaps not very reluctantly, his own share in the diversion which his host was pursuing with all the ardour of a boy at play, ‘who would fly their hawks a long day through, and never weary, aye, and follow the hunt as well, with as much glee as myself could do.’ He thought of Claudine in that moment, with her wild ways and active habits, and cer-

tainly for the time, the graceful lady at his side appeared to him the more perfect woman of the two.

'I have always marvelled,' observed the Lady Blanche, with a slight accent of superior disdain, 'to see how ladies will take delight in such rough and unseemly pastime, which may, indeed, sort well enough with the stern and turbulent spirits of men, but can have no accord with the softer graces of womanhood. For me, I would as readily buckle on steel armour, and mingle in the carnage of a battle, as I would seek pleasure amid the tumultuous riot of the hunting-field.'

'And yet,' said Bertram, 'though it is a thought not misbecoming a lady's tender breast, methinks the days must drag often wearily in this retirement wherein you dwell, if you refrain from so much of such gallant pastime as ladies used to practise.'

'Time well employed, my lord,' replied the lady, drooping her eyes, 'need never be weary. And however true it be that I live here retired, yet am I not alone ; it is the lonely hours which weigh heavily.'

'It is so,' answered Bertram musingly ; and he said it with a half sigh, which did not escape his companion's observation.

'You dwell alone, my lord ?' she questioned softly, while bending her dark eyes upon him, with a look of more interest than he had yet seen in them.

'But for the loving service of faithful followers and vassals,' answered Bertram, striving to smile in answer to her gaze, though he felt his cheeks flush and his eyes fall beneath it, 'I have dwelt alone this many a day.'

'Tis a hard fate,' resumed Lady Blanche, looking this time not at him, but at the springing grass beneath her horse's feet ; 'it is a hard fate for a gentle and a social heart such as I know is yours, when there is none with whom to hold friendly converse : none to share your hopes, your glory, or your pastime.'

'Yet not so hard, but a man may well support it,' said he, speaking lightly with a shade of effort, 'when he is blessed by youth, by honour, and by fortune.'

'I know not that,' she replied thoughtfully ; 'and indeed,

my lord, I count you less fortunate than you are willing to hold yourself, if, though with so many good gifts, you must still abide in solitude. It is little, in truth, that a simple maiden can know of the ways of men; yet this much I know, that there is not a beast, no, nor a bird, even though wild in the forest, that would choose to be alone; that would not pine and sicken, if parted from its kind. Fire, my lord, must have the wood to feed upon, or it eats away its life and dies.'

Bertram stood listening to all this and more that followed, with scarcely an attempt at reply. That new tone of interest in her voice seemed to transport him with something like the elation of wine; and he was by no means gratified when the *Sieur de Nerveau*, who had been looking round for him some time before, came up to interrupt their colloquy. The attention of the old man had been so deeply absorbed in his own sport, that he had really been at first unobservant of his young companion's prolonged absence from his side; but he now rallied him on his indifference with a surprise, which held some flavour of real indignation.

'How now, my lord, call you this a fair morning's hawking? It is well enough with *Blanche*, silly child, all know it for her humour to stand aside from such a scene; but I had little thought to see you ranged by her side, mute and motionless as at a funeral. Had I deemed you would be 'laggard, I needed not have set that noble bird upon your fist, the same that my son bore ever in his own company, and trained and loved till she would take the meat from out his very lips. Why, the gallant bird herself might shame you, as she flaps her wings and cranes her neck, while the sounds of the mirthful sport are filling the air.'

Bertram was compelled to follow his host, and during the next hour or two to throw himself into the business of the day with an interest, which soon ceased to be altogether assumed; and though he could not rival the enthusiasm of the *Sieur de Nerveau*, was yet able, in great measure, to redeem his reputation in the eyes of the old knight, who ascribed to his favourite diversion all the

exaggerated consequence common with aged persons, who have attached themselves strongly to one single pursuit. On this morning Bertram had occasion to observe what he had scarcely noted before, that his host was subject to those tempestuous gusts of passion, which have the startling effect of the sudden leaping forth of concealed flame. More than once did he appear half transported with anger at some trifling mistake or omission of an attendant, and at length struck a man to the ground so heavily, that Bertram was left in no less astonishment at the strength which still dwelt in his arm, than at the signs of a violent and turbulent spirit, coming from a mind, which had at first appeared to him so peculiarly open to the influence of the softer feelings. He stood silently watching the *Sieur de Nerveau*, who tramped up and down a little apart devouring his wrath, and making use of more oaths in ten minutes than might, under ordinary circumstances, have served him for a week, but turned at last and came towards Bertram.

‘I am quick to take fire as touchwood,’ he said, with a half smile, perhaps in apologetic reply to a little surprise not quite hidden in the expression of his young guest; ‘yes, yes, there is some spark of the old spirit left yet, both in the heart and the limbs. But for all that, my young friend, I am a kind master to them all; and the knaves know it. Here, fellow!’ he cried, tossing a small coin to the man, who had gathered himself up less disconcerted by the fall, than might have been expected; ‘take that to salve thy bruises. My lord, it wears late, and if it accords with your pleasure, we will turn our faces homewards. I doubt my silly *Blanche* there is wearied by this time of standing apart upon a hill while leaving all the sport of the day to us. I marvel, indeed, that she joined us to-day: it is long since she ever came with me.’

Bertram was not ill pleased upon that evening when his host instead of making any further demands upon his attention, called for a huge illuminated volume, which he spread open upon his knees, and composed himself to read with an appearance of great seriousness.

‘It is a precious volume, this,’ he said, meeting the eye of his guest, who turned aside for an instant from his conversation with Lady Blanche—‘given to me long since by my old friend, the Abbot of St. Stephen’s, hard by. You do not read, my lord? The young blood is too warm, truly, that it should love to pore over a written page. ’Twas of my mother, in childhood, that I had the art : and now that I am old, I have sometimes found in my book a spell to while away a vacant hour. I like well to summon up in fancy the scenes which with the eye I can behold no longer, of the movements of armies, and the exploits of heroes.’

With this explanatory discourse, the worthy knight again turned to his book, bending upon it all the keenness of an eyesight which, unspoiled by over much application in earlier years, was still able to do him good service in his age. The hospitality of the *Sieur de Nerveau* would not probably have suffered him to abstract his attention from his guest for any length of time ; but whether it was that the nature of his studies was in itself soporific, or the draughts of wine he had swallowed disposed him to slumber, or that the old chronicle, which formed indeed his complete library, had been so many times coured over by him that he knew its contents by heart ; in any case, a quarter of an hour had not elapsed, before the old man began to nod his head forwards, and fell by degrees into a profound sleep ; while the great gray wolf-hound at his side laid his head upon his arm and slumbered in company, the long white hair of the man mingling with the rough and torn coat of his favourite.

Bertram, meanwhile, was enjoying an hour of what seemed to him perfect unmixed happiness ; as he talked alone with the lady who had gradually drawn him towards her by some subtle attraction ; as the spider’s web is woven by almost imperceptible degrees, between the hawthorn twigs, upon a summer morning. Now, when the pleasure of the passing hour looked as bright as the dewdrops that sparkle upon the cobweb in the sun, it was not a time in which Bertram could ask himself whether it would vanish as quickly. To tell the words which passed between

them, would be to tell nothing of the influence that surrounded him, enchanting the rude and dimly lighted hall, as it had done before the calm sunshine of open day. He spoke no words of love, he did not even tell himself that love was in his heart; content to bask silently in the happiness, which seemed to have fallen down upon him from heaven, when he least looked for happiness.

All the passages of his former life seemed to have fallen back to an immeasurable distance; or rather, he thought of them, if he thought at all, as a man might recall past things in an opium dream, while the future was equally remote. Past and future both merged in the present, as they only occasionally can be in life. How Bertram blessed the old man's sleep, which released him from his importunity, and left him free to enjoy these moments!

The lady seemed to partake his pleasure, talking to him low and sweetly as she always did, and remaining with him until long after the time at which she usually withdrew. When she was gone at last, Bertram still sat gazing at the fire in a happy trance, and waiting until his host should awake.

The *Sieur de Nerveau*, however, slumbered so deeply and long, that his attendants began to look at each other in some perplexity, for none could venture to rouse him on such occasions, and he had been known to sleep before the fire the whole night through, much to the dissatisfaction of his squire, who was forced to remain in attendance lest his services might be required at any moment. They therefore tried, by making as great a buzz and clatter as they could among themselves, to induce him to awake; and though the unaccustomed stir failed to rouse the attention of their master, whose head grew heavy after his wine, it was effectual with his more alert and vigilant sleeping companion, the great hound, who soon lifted his head, and began to bay so loudly, that the *Sieur de Nerveau* was also aroused perforce.

'Why, how is this?' he said, when, after rubbing his eyes with some unintelligible grunts, he at length stood upon his feet. 'Have I slumbered away all the evening

in unconsciousness? You must have passed your time but dully, my lord; and were it not that I know you can find allowance for the infirmity of age, I should scarce know how to excuse the neglect.'

Bertram answered with a bright smile, and that night was the first upon which he had lain down to sleep, without promising himself that he would leave that castle, and pursue his journey to-morrow.

W MALLISON.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE morning of the succeeding day was wearing rapidly towards noon, when a knight, followed by two or three attendants, presented himself before the castle, and gained instant admission as a well-known and welcome guest. Bertram, standing with the Lady Blanche in a sheltered corner, to which he had withdrawn for one precious half-hour, after a morning spent in ceaseless attention to her father, started with more surprise than the simple occurrence seemed to call for; when he presently recognised his cousin, Gaston de Drumont, in the person of the traveller who advanced towards them.

How was it that in the first moment of his approach with that easy confident air, at the lady's half-exclamation of joyful surprise, Bertram awoke to the consciousness that he was walking on the verge of a precipice; but that the fruit, which had seemed to him to dangle temptingly over its brink, was reserved for another hand to gather? He could not have told, and yet he knew it well. He would have known it even if he had not seen the eagerness, with which the lady ran forward to greet the newcomer, and hung upon his arm, calling him her dear knight, and reproaching him with having been so long away.

Bertram stood for a few moments like one stunned, in the sudden revulsion of feeling which had come upon him; while thoughts and recollections, once familiar,

now seeming strange, crowded confusedly into his mind. Sir Gaston, as soon as his attention was unoccupied, turned towards him, with a glance of so much sarcastic meaning that Bertram felt the hot blood mounting to his forehead, as he recalled the occasion of their last meeting, and divined something of what might be in his cousin's mind, of what at least that look seemed intended to convey. Sir Gaston regarded him fixedly for a moment, and then said frankly, as he approached a few paces nearer, that he trusted there was nothing in their former intercourse, which need prevent his cousin and himself from meeting as kinsmen. Bertram returned his salutation mechanically, and endeavoured in a few almost inarticulate words to reply ; but withdrew immediately afterwards into a more lonely place, where he might give free way to the thoughts, which were pouring in upon his brain.

He thought now at length of Claudine—the first time that he had thought of her with any serious intentness since coming to that place ; but the recollection now seemed repugnant to him, he knew not why. He was for the time dazed by the fierce light, which seemed suddenly to have been cast upon his motives and desires ; and went groping, as it were, among the confused and conflicting emotions of his mind, seeking in vain for the clue of purpose, which was to lead him again into a straight and certain path. Yet in the very midst of the whirl a dim, far-past scene rose distinct in his memory ; and he stood again a child, with his hand clasped in that of another, by the side of a dying bed, while the failing voice repeated slowly : ‘ I have this night placed my only child in thy hands, and as thou servest her with true devotion so may the blessing of a dying man fall upon thy head. But if thou art false to this trust——’

Bertram, with the words yet sounding in his ears, looked towards the spot where stood the graceful lady, who had drawn him to her presence, as by fascination, for days past, hanging upon her lover's arm. As he watched and saw her beauty shining out the more brilliantly in a full flood of sunlight, he felt and knew fully how it was by the spell of her fair eyes, and nameless witcheries, that

he had been held so long, to waste his days in this obscure retreat, forgetful of his purposes, of his engagements, of everything but his honour : and the thought stung him into action. He could listen to no other impulse at the moment, than that which impelled him to rapid motion, and urged him to break the silken cords, which seemed to bind him so strongly to this place.

Regardless of the surprise which might be felt, whether by his cousin or by any other, at so abrupt a departure, taken with a manner which all his efforts at self-control could not render tranquil and composed, Bertram hurried instantly in person to the place where he knew the greater number of his attendants were most likely at that time to be assembled, and bid them prepare to depart on the instant ; neither did he leave them until he saw their arrangements well advanced. The men themselves, delighted to see their Baron awake from incomprehensible inaction, startled by his unexpected appearance among them, and struck by the unusual tone and manner remarked by all, bestirred themselves with such bustling activity, that their haste would have satisfied any but one impatient to fly from his own thoughts, as Bertram was. Some who lay lazily their length upon the ground, half-slumbering in the sun, sprang to their feet as though in answer to a sudden call to battle ; others in the act of drinking hastily set down their cups without waiting to finish the draught ; some ran to find and warn the absent members of their company ; some led out the horses, and began to fasten on their trappings with impatient fingers.

Bertram stood with folded arms, gnawing his lips in uneasy restlessness, while he submitted to the services of his esquire, who was bestowing that attention upon his personal equipment, which he certainly would never have done upon it himself. His followers, even amid their most rapid bustle, exchanged some side glances, and a few whispered comments, upon the unusual bearing of their lord ; but the knowledge that his eyes were keenly bent upon them prevented, for the present, any lengthened conjectures as to the causes of his evident disturbance.

It was not long before the sound of footsteps from

behind caused Bertram to turn his head ; and the next instant the *Sieur de Nerveau* bustled up to his side, looking about him, with an air of perplexed consternation almost ludicrous.

'My lord, my lord,' remonstrated the old man, 'what new order is this? Is it thus that you would quit us without leave-taking?'

'I crave pardon, my kind host,' answered Bertram, thus recalled to the duties of courtesy which he had well-nigh forgotten ; 'quit you I must, though surely not without leave-taking. Your hospitality, sir,' he added, trying to force a smile, 'has held me prisoner as I fear too long, and my affairs press.'

The old Knight would have endeavoured by persuasion and argument to shake this resolve, to postpone the departure at least until the morrow ; but Bertram, to whom this language of mutual compliment was just then almost insupportable, broke in upon his words with far less than the usual ceremony, exclaiming :

'Do not seek to move me, sir ; my purpose is fixed !'

The old man's importunity was silenced, as easily as a child's, by the imperious tone and the glance, half haughty, half appealing, cast upon him by his young guest ; and as he stood a silent spectator he, too, began to form his own conjectures, as to the causes for this sudden change of conduct. In the eyes of the worthy Knight the matter soon appeared as clear as daylight. Young blood would have its feuds and jealousies ; neither was near relationship any guarantee for friendly feeling. The *Sieur de Nerveau* had seen two brothers in the bitterest enmity many a time ere now. What could be plainer to the sight of any, than that the young Baron de Drumont bore no love to his cousin, whose unexpected arrival was made the signal for a sudden departure ? What but some bitter quarrel between the two, could sufficiently account for this abruptness, for the obvious constraint of their meeting, or for Bertram's altered looks and bearing ? The *Sieur de Nerveau* settled the matter thus to his own entire satisfaction ; and was still further confirmed in the view he took when Gaston de Drumont strolled carelessly

up, and spoke to his cousin in tones too low to reach any other ear.

‘I trust,’ he said smiling, ‘that I have not come hither to spoil your pastime. I should be loth to part fair company. Nay, do not turn of so furious a colour—I am no niggard man, that would have no eyes fall upon his possessions save his own; but one that loves to flaunt them in the common sight, and think it no shame neither.’

The laughing satire in Sir Gaston’s eyes faded out of them as he met the full proud look, which was all the answer to his words.

‘Let us at least join hands in friendship before we part,’ he added more gravely.

Bertram took the offered hand, and then, mounting in impatient haste, was free in a few more moments from the group of busy observers, whom it was now his first wish to avoid. He rode out looking neither to the right hand nor the left, only when a scarf was seen to flutter for an instant at a distance, he waved his hand in silent answer, and departed without a backward look.

Over rough, uneven ground, past dense masses of wild wood, neglected waste, or cultivated meadow-land, Bertram rode rapidly, seeking for escape from his own thoughts. But thought in such cases clings with a desperate hold, and will not be shaken off, as the wild cat clings fast upon the neck of an unhappy stag, who cannot, by all his fleetness, free himself from its grip. He had approached that place in despondency, but he quitted it in a hot fever of imagination, in the midst of which he strove in vain to recover his former self. Wherever his eyes were turned the haunting shadow of a fair face pursued him, until he turned the whole force of his will into an indignant effort to shake it off. What right had that picture to any place in his mind? was he not bound? Or if the bonds appeared half loosened, of what avail was that, while his cousin’s half scornful words were still fresh in his memory? Nevertheless, just then he fumed, with impatience, at the thought that he was bound.

The trouble which weighed upon him was plainly not to be outridden; and Bertram at last drew his rein, and

alighted at the foot of a spreading willow tree, which hung its broad branches over a noisy brook, flowing through a tract of waste and thinly wooded country, whose borders they had just reached. Beneath this tree he sat, with head bent forwards and hands busily tearing out bunches of the coarse grass, which grew at the water's edge ; while he struggled blindly, with a dumb desperation, that he had never known before. To cast off the weight of it, and to banish the pursuing face, was all his effort in that moment ; and when he lifted his face again, though it was white to the lips, he was in a calmer, less fevered mood, and felt better able to breathe and to think. He thought now of Claudine, and of the circumstances of his relation to her. Bertram, from his childhood, had been taught to look upon his obligations towards her as the most binding upon his honour, that could ever be laid upon him ; and his was no careless nature like his cousin Gaston's, over which such teaching could pass lightly and leave no lasting effects ; but into whatever was set before him to do, he threw his whole heart. Claudine had so long been one of the chief objects of his care and interest, that no recent impressions, however vivid, could banish her altogether from his mind for any length of time ; and now he seized eagerly upon this new subject of reflection, as another means of combating that, from which he wished to turn away.

It was true that he had had some reason to believe that Claudine was to be divided from him in the future, for he felt that neither pride nor generosity would suffer him even to attempt to restrain her will ; but he began to wonder whether he had not been too hasty in his conclusions upon the matter. Claudine would surely not have sought to separate herself from him entirely, in a manner of such cold abruptness, and without a message or token from herself. He recalled her last look, and last words, when they parted ; and something of the same confidence with which she regarded him, came into his mind to persuade him that the wayward little wife, who had loved him in her childish fashion, had not yet forgotten him so completely. How could he be certain that she no

longer stood in need of his protection ; in more need, it might be, than ever before, if she was now subject to any constraint, as he began to think possible, even probable.

Three times he had inquired for her at the convent ; and she had been denied to him, not surely by her own desire. He must consider this, he thought, wearily ; must endeavour to see her, and find in what state she was. He would have been happy in these reflections days before, but now they served only to increase his distress. If Claudine were to be anything at all to him, how could he let her hold the second place ?

Tired with thinking, Bertram at last rose abruptly to his feet ; when his squire, who had till then held aloof, approached with his horse that he might remount, but the young Baron turned away with impatience, saying :

‘ I go no farther to-night.’

The youth ventured to suggest that they might find accommodation for the night at no great distance ; but Bertram turned away from him yet more decidedly, repeating :

‘ I want no strange converse, I go no further. Can we not rest in this place as well as another ?’

The followers, who had long been waiting his pleasure, exchanged meaning glances, but no one tried to press him further ; some fastened their horses loosely to the trunks of trees, and searched for wood and dry rushes, with which to light a fire ; while others galloped off to see whether any supplies were obtainable for supper, which they could not conveniently forego.

Bertram walked to and fro a little apart, gazing listlessly from the fast sinking sun to the red blaze, which at last began to illuminate the surrounding waste, and the busy figures which soon assembled around it preparing in rough and hasty fashion the meats they had been able to procure ; till at length, when all was prepared, he was induced to draw nearer and partake of a meal, of which he began to feel he stood in need ; but whether what he ate was goat’s flesh, or barley bread ; whether he drank wine or water, was what he could not have told.

The night passed over slowly. Bertram, by the fire, fell

now and then into a short sleep; and in his wakeful moments lay vaguely counting the stars, and listening to the occasional call of some startled wild bird; or to the low-toned conversation of two or three who had thought it wise to watch by the sleeping party; without dwelling longer upon the matters that troubled him. They had left him for the time, and he was in no haste to summon them back.

The air for the time of year was so mild, and the weather so fine, that there could be no inconvenience attendant upon this night encampment; the horses, overtaken by sleep while in the very act of grazing, slumbered with long tufts of grass hanging from their mouths, as tranquilly as their masters, who were all snoring lustily as they lay wrapped in their cloaks upon ground, which was certainly no harder than the floor of the hall which formed their usual couch.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHEN the first streaks of dawn appeared in the sky, Bertram started up, appearing now impatient to proceed; and though still serious and downcast in aspect, his followers were glad to observe that he had resumed something of his natural manner, and seemed no longer wild and half distraught. He was silent, but not now unapproachable, though noticing little of the objects that soon pressed more thickly upon the attention of the travellers as they approached nearer to Paris; an hour which had intense interest for all his little company, as the sight of any considerable city was a novelty to some, and a rare event to all. The buzz of delighted excitement, which greeted their first glimpse of the turrets and battlements of Paris, with the mid-day sun lighting up the busy turmoil of its streets, was so loud, that even Bertram turned his head, and looked towards the scene with a more awakened attention, though it was not unfamiliar to him. As they entered the city itself

shortly afterwards, the pleasure and admiration of the more inexperienced youths was still freshly excited by every new sight of wonder ; though their elder companions seemed in the mind that it best befitted their dignity, as men of wide travel, and knowledge as wide, to look upon everything with an air of careless indifference ; while those more fortunate, who could find no room in their thoughts for anything but the present delight, gazed around them with wide eyes, as they slowly pressed through the many obstructions which barred their way in the narrow streets ; and if a horse stumbled now and then over some heap of rubbish, thrown carelessly in the middle of the track, his rider merely pulled him up by an impatient jerk of the reins, unable to spare a glance to cast beneath him.

Bertram had no wish to remain in Paris an hour longer than he might find needful, and his arrival took place so early in the day that he thought he might well attend at the court which the King held upon the same afternoon ; and thus, it might be, finish quickly the business which had brought him thither. Accordingly, after a short interval of rest and refreshment, he suffered his esquire to attire him with all the fantastic elegance proper to the occasion, and set forth towards the palace. Even now the former preoccupation of mind, bred of distress and fatigue, still overshadowed him ; and he once or twice came near breeding serious contention by neglecting to give place to some haughty, punctilious nobleman on their meeting in the narrow way.

The Court of St. Louis, in those early days, was somewhat less magnificent than that of his illustrious grandfather, to which Bertram had accompanied his father a few years since ; and, as he stood aside a spectator rather than a sharer of the scene, his mind flew back to that former time when he had been able to throw his whole heart into the revelry and enchantment which seemed to the boy to reign throughout the precincts of the royal residence. Now, he felt divided by an impassable gulf from all the brilliant figures that flitted before him, like the passing fancies of the brain, more than living men of

flesh and blood ; and he had no eyes to penetrate beneath the smiling show of felicity, which masked, perhaps, some hearts no less troubled than his own.

Bertram stood aside, unobserved, until it became necessary for him to approach the King ; and he advanced slowly and reluctantly to offer his homage, half unconscious, indeed, of the many eyes which rested on him, yet longing for his part in the pageant to be over, that he might feed upon his sadness again in solitude.

As the young Baron bent over the hand of the boy King, it was almost by a blind instinct that he went through the necessary forms ; but, in the moment of raising his head, his eyes fell upon the calm, beautiful face of the Regent, the gentle Queen-mother, Blanche of Castile, who was looking at him—or so he fancied it—with an expression of as much interest and compassion as though she read the trouble in his face, and knew of the conflict through which his mind was passing. Those mild, motherly eyes held such an attraction for Bertram, that he permitted himself to gaze upon the Queen for a longer space than strict etiquette might perhaps have sanctioned, and, with something of the pleading glance of a child in pain, seeking for relief, or sympathy at least, from anyone who approaches him.

In part, perhaps, to break through the attraction which fixed her with this curiously intent look, Queen Blanche addressed a few gentle and courteous words to the young Baron, whose appearance had indeed interested her, and disposed her to wish to detain him in discourse. Bertram, in reply, however, appeared so much confused, and coloured so highly, as he realized the boldness of his prolonged gaze, that the Queen, finding at the end of a few moments that her condescension could not set him at ease, and even the good-natured efforts of the King appeared to cause him embarrassment, thought it better to permit him to retire, and Bertram, much relieved, fell back again into the crowd.

Not so easily, however, could he escape the attention of many among the cavaliers who thronged the presence-chamber, and who claimed acquaintance, as having been

formerly known either to his father or himself. He endured these attacks with all the patience he could summon to his aid; and yet more than one gentleman was left half-affronted by the abrupt manner in which he broke away from him, and the evident impatience with which his friendly advances were met.

'This is no true branch of the old tree,' remarked a knight of high repute and noble family, who conceived himself to have been treated with impatient indifference, amounting to contempt; 'that we have in that young springald. His father was a man of another mould, and was never seen to carry his head so high that he could not see his friends.'

'The lad is distraught,' replied his neighbour, in the cautiously lowered tones best befitting the time and place. 'Saw you not how like a clown he stood staring upon the Queen but now, and when she spoke to him he blushed as red as any peasant-maid? And yet, to look at him, the young lord should lack neither sense nor courtly breeding. Some love-craze, never doubt it, has crossed him to-day. Those are the things that turn the brains of young cavaliers.'

'I know not for that, Sir Count,' replied the old knight, somewhat sternly; 'but whether men's brains be crazed or whole, I will take no slight from any.'

As he spoke he darted a fiery glance towards Bertram, who had now regained his secluded station against the wall, and neither heard nor saw anything of the comments passed upon him. After waiting unmolested for a short time longer, he contrived to slip unnoticed from the presence, and, having rejoined the attendants who awaited him without, began to indulge himself with the hope that he might quit the capital itself shortly, perhaps even upon the next day.

It proved impossible in the end, however, to arrange his departure so early. In spite of his efforts he was reluctantly drawn a little towards the whirl of life that surrounded him, and many causes united to detain him in the city for several days. In the end, perhaps, he hardly regretted it, for he soon began to feel that to be forced,

as he now was, to mix with many different men, and join to some extent in their pleasures, was no bad medicine for his moody melancholy, which now began to torment him less, though he could not look at the future without grave perplexity.

It was in the middle of March that he at last left Paris, after a stay of four or five days, and turned towards home.

CHAPTER XXXV.

It happened about this time, that the Baron de Raston presented himself one morning, at the Convent of St. Agnes, in a mood of angry discontent. He had become extremely impatient of the slow progress which he was making in Claudine's regard, upon which he set an unreasoning price, mainly because it seemed to lie beyond his reach. In the interview which he held with his aunt on this morning, he urged the demand that he might be allowed to see Claudine without her presence, which he justly felt to be a hindrance to his freedom of expression; and he thought it might be more easy to win some power over Claudine's mind, if she could be left with him unfettered by the presence of any witness. It was some time before the Prioress could be brought to consent to leave her niece; and not even to satisfy the wishes of the nephew to whom she could scarce deny anything, would she agree that the girl should be left with him entirely alone. An elderly nun was appointed to be present during the interview; and this arrangement, while fulfilling to the lady's mind all the claims of prudence and decorum, promised other advantages; for, since the duenna was dim-sighted, foolish, and almost completely deaf, her presence need be of little more inconvenience to the Baron, than if one of the lifeless images of the saints had been brought thither from the chapel, to watch his proceedings.

Claudine, when she entered, was much surprised to find

that her aunt did not fill her usual place, and would have turned immediately to quit the room, but that she was assured by the old nun that the arrangement was of the Prioress's own making, while the Baron de Raston poured forth a flood of expostulation and entreaty that she would remain. She returned and stood quietly, with eyes fixed upon the ground, as though in the resolve to listen with patience to anything he might choose to say.

Armand de Raston was not a man to be subdued by feelings of either embarrassment or deference in the presence of any woman ; and he now began to recommend himself, and plead his cause with a fervour of passion, which he had certainly never before displayed ; and in a manner and language, which he would perhaps have hesitated to display in the presence of his aunt. Claudine grew intensely pale, and her replies, when they were forced from her, became colder and colder as he proceeded. It was the first time she had ever heard the language of impassioned love ; but there was nothing which could attract in the eyes yet dull from the previous night's debauch, or the countenance and bearing to which the dignity of manliness had long been wanting, more than in the offensive words and tones with which he addressed her ; and Claudine shrank from him more and more, till at length she was again on the point of a hasty retirement.

As he perceived her about to leave him, the smouldering fire of anger, which he had been nursing in his heart, leaped up into a fierce blaze, and he called to her in tones of his most stormy wrath, and garnishing his speech with oaths more tremendous than she had ever before heard.

'Stay ! you shall not quit me thus. Think you that I, who bend all around me to my will, am to be scorned and baffled by a silly maid ? or that your pale baby face, and lisping voice, have force to turn *me* from my purpose ? Well do I know what it is that stands in my path ; but this half-linked spouse of yours, for whom you slight me, shall not long prevent me from my fancy. When I have laid him prostrate at my feet, and set my foot upon his

neck, then I will return to you again ; and, struggle as you may, I will win you to myself. Ay, you may well shrink away now, but the time shall come when I will have you crouch to me like my hound.'

Claudine had indeed recoiled from his violent words, and the furious glances and gestures which accompanied them ; thankful, before all, for the grating which divided her from this man, so that he could not approach her nearly, or lay his hand upon her. With an instinctive appeal, she turned towards the older woman, from whom she might have looked for support and protection against insult ; but the poor old creature, regardless, as usual, of what passed around her, was busily mumbling over her rosary ; the course of her religious exercises, in which so many years of her life had been spent, having left no more definite impression upon her mind at last, than that it was an act of piety to tell over her beads as many times in the day as she could—a duty which she accordingly practised most assiduously at all seasons.

Claudine looked again to the Baron, and there was no shrinking now in the haughty erectness of her girlish figure, more than in the indignant scorn that flashed upon him from her eyes, now she stood at bay.

'I do not fear you,' she said, in strong, clear tones, which he had never heard before. 'What ! do you speak to me as though I were your serf already ? I have feared, I have loathed you before—I do but scorn you now ! For the Baron de Drumont, he will know well how to guard his safety, from all the dangers with which treason or fury can threaten it.'

'You do not fear me !' repeated the furious Baron ; 'then, by the sun that shines above us, pretty lady, but I will find the way to make you ; and I will drag you to me yet, though it were with chains of iron.'

'And, think you, that there is no refuge open to me,' said Claudine, 'from violence and insult ? I stand here to-day to tell you that you will never draw me to you ; and if you have never before met any who could withstand your will, Sir Baron, you shall find it now.'

Armand de Raston could reply only by an evil look,

for the intensity of his passion deprived him of the power of utterance. He paced to and fro, muttering inarticulately, and directing savage glances towards the young girl, who still kept her former stand, trembling now from head to foot, but more from the tension of her high-wrought excitement than from actual terror—though terror, in spite of her lofty bearing, she could not but feel. She would have fled from the room if she could, but she was fascinated ; and it seemed as though she could only stand gazing upon this half-insane man, as he raged before her in the throes of a passion, the like of which she had never witnessed before.

When at length he recovered his speech, he began to address her in language, which so far exceeded in impropriety any that had gone before it, that it had the effect of breaking the spell that bound her ; and, putting aside, with an authoritative gesture, the old nun who had stationed herself directly in her path, Claudine quitted the room, and thus escaped from words which were unsuited to a lady's ears. The old woman, whose attention had been at last attracted, and her terrors excited, by the furious aspect and gestures of the cavalier, though she could not hear his words, fled hastily also ; and the Baron de Raston was left to pace through the parlour alone. He did not remain there long ; but before one quarter of an hour had passed, he was well away from the convent precincts, riding on with a heart burning with fury against the whole world, and Bertram de Drumont in particular. In the course of a few hours, however, he had contrived to drown all his displeasures so deep in wine, that there could be little danger of their taking any more active shape, upon that day at least.

Claudine, in the meantime, had gone at once and unobserved to her chamber, whither she instantly summoned Louise, and bid her carefully close the door, and assure herself that there were no listeners who could overhear their conversation. Louise, having done this with elaborate caution, returned in some curiosity to her young lady, who signed to her to sit close beside her.

‘ Louise,’ said Claudine, ‘ thou knowest it is very long .

that I have fretted and wearied against the sad life we have led here ; but now I am steadfast that I will support it no longer. Come what may of it, I will quit this convent, though I know not well how.'

'You will leave it alone, you will fly in secret ?' cried the waiting-maiden, quickly seizing the meaning of the words, with tokens of the most lively satisfaction. 'Ah ! how often have I not longed to do it. To hear such a saying from you, Lady Claudine, is more welcome than spring after winter.'

'Then thou wilt take part with me, Louise, in such a venture ?' pursued the young lady anxiously.

'Do you ask if I will venture with you ?' said Louise ; 'truly there is little cause to doubt whether one who has followed you into this place, would be ready to follow you out again. And then, too, are you not my own dear lady ; and is it not my place to attend you everywhere ?'

'Indeed, Louise,' said Claudine, with a brightening face, as she laid her hand affectionately upon her companion's arm, 'I knew well that thou wouldst cleave to me. So then, we will fly together, thou and I ; and we will return again to the home where we shall be happy, happy as we were in the old days.'

'And then, no more long dull days and grim faces,' exclaimed Louise, joining her hands together like a delighted child ; 'no more harsh rules and long, long prayers, through which one must nod, and drowse, and pinch one's self awake fifty times a day. No more sour looks from the lady Prioress !'

'Such things as these,' said Claudine, 'we might, perhaps, have borne, though I cannot tell ; we have endured them long, at least ; but the affronts and violence of the Baron de Raston I will suffer no longer. My aunt has at last filled up the measure of her unkindness, by the manner in which she has left me exposed to the persecutions of this man.'

'He has been here, then ?' eagerly interrupted the waiting-maid ; 'it is little enough that one can tell of what passes, but my mind misgave me that he had been here. And what said he to you, Lady Claudine ? with a plague

upon his black-visaged face, to ruffle my pretty mistress ! Tell me, for pity, all that he has said and done.'

'Let us not talk of him,' replied Claudine, drawing back in her confidence, with that capricious reserve she had begun to display of late, 'we have to think now of our flight.'

'And I have told you,' Lady Claudine, 'returned Louise, a little piqued at finding her mistress indisposed to tell her all she wished to know, 'that I am ready to fly with you this very hour ; but the means, how can we find the means ?'

'Nay, I must have thy aid for that,' answered her mistress, 'for thou art more ready with schemes and devices than I. Come, Louise, thy quick wit will soon find us a way. Think, and tell me what we must do.'

Louise sat down upon the floor and thought, puckering her brows into endless lines and dimples, and clasping her hands round her knee, while Claudine watched her anxiously ; yet confident that so much labour must produce some result.

'Well, Louise?' she said at length, after a silence of several moments.

'I can think of nothing yet,' replied Louise, looking up with the same puzzled face ; 'I cannot steal the keys, I fear, for they are kept so strictly, a magpie could not find a way for that, and though I have seen you, Lady Claudine, years ago, run and scramble like a kitten the whole day long, yet neither of us could overclimb these high stone walls.'

'Could we not,' said Claudine hurriedly, 'so work upon the portress, whether by fair words or by gold, that she would consent to let us pass ?'

Louise shook her head, and twisted her mouth in most expressive fashion.

'Lady Claudine, could you but have seen the wry glances she will cast upon me whenever I pass her by ; or hear her flouts and jeers upon giddy damsels and their frippery that she loves to throw out for my ears ; or the crabbed tones of her voice, when she must speak to me, you would not ask that. She bears no such good-will to

me, or to you, credit me, to derange herself in our service. I misdoubt that there is no one in this convent, who has enough of love for you to risk such aid.'

'I would not be the occasion of risk to any,' said Claudine, 'and it will be best, I see, that we should keep our secret closely, lest we be betrayed. But there is one whom I had nearly forgot—Babette. Couldst thou not find some device to get speech with her? I would gladly have her with me now.'

'Oh no, truly,' replied Louise, tossing her head with something like a sneer, 'Mistress Babette is far too sage and heedful to have any part in a venture such as this. Let her be, Lady Claudine, let her be. For my part, I say we are well rid of her grave looks and sober counsels. She would but seek to hinder your purpose, and to hold you back from what she dare not attempt, if you let her have part in your secrets. More than that, I know not how I could speak with her in secret. Oh, it is a troublesome matter, and might ruin all. Be ruled by me, and let her alone.'

Claudine agreed that they should attempt to make no one, not even Babette, acquainted with their intended flight, and they again tried vainly to think of some possible means of escape. At length they were obliged to leave this question still unsettled; but Louise promised that she would keep it simmering in her head, to use her own expression, and would not fail to devise some plan.

'Louise,' then said Claudine for the first time, 'canst thou tell how many leagues we must cross, to reach the castle?'

Louise replied that she was not quite sure of the distance, but that it could not be very great, for, as she reminded her lady, their journey upon their coming thither had not filled one entire day.

'And were it even farther,' she added, 'I would walk barefoot for three days, if I might leave this dreary convent behind me.'

'Or I for ten,' said Claudine. 'Think quickly, dear Louise, that we may soon be gone. Since I have thought upon it, the air I breathe here seems to stifle me.'

Louise had an almost unbounded confidence, whether rightly or wrongly, placed in her own faculties of intrigue and contrivance, and was troubled by few doubts as to her power to manage the affair she had undertaken, and the rest of this day was spent by her in wandering over all possible places, and talking with all possible persons, for, as she truly said, by looking and listening everywhere one gathers up new notions, which might never come by thinking. Louise therefore looked and listened with all her eyes and ears, but vainly ; whether it was that the hints she was in search of did not come, or that she was unable to seize upon their meaning, no new discoveries came to her from prying into nooks and crannies long since known by heart ; neither did any new device flash upon her mind, though she attended earnestly to the rather tedious gossip of all who would converse with her. She returned to her mistress a little crestfallen at her ill-success, but Claudine urged and encouraged her to hope that time would not fail to suggest some plan. They had only, she said, to think of the means of passing through the convent gates, let that once be over, and it would all be well ; and they cheered each other by talking of the happy end of their journey, till the first step appeared, not only possible, but easy.

Two or three days passed in this way, and still Louise could only shake her head in sad perplexity whenever Claudine tried to read her face upon a chance meeting ; while neither had any possible scheme to propose, when they talked together. It is true that many fanciful suggestions were talked of between them, but they were all such as their better sense was obliged to reject ; and though Claudine clung fixedly to her resolution of escaping from the distasteful life she led, she might perhaps have been unable to carry it out, if chance, more than her own contrivance, had not favoured her.

At this time a sudden attack of illness, which threatened to become serious, confined the Prioress entirely to her own apartments, while Sister Rachel and two or three others were constantly busied in attending on her. This state of things left Claudine even more alone and

unnoticed than usual ; while everyone in the convent seemed inclined to relax a little of the strictness of their ordinary routine of duty. It seemed to be the very time of all others best fitted to further Claudine's wishes. Claudine would not have liked to say that she rejoiced in the sickness of her aunt, but she certainly saw in it an opportunity by which she was extremely impatient to profit ; Louise, on the other hand, had no reserve in alluding to it as heaven's own providence, which must on no account be neglected.

'I have heard it said many a time, and I will vouch it for a truth, Lady Claudine,' she said, 'that those who let their chances slip once through their fingers, will never be able to seize them by the right end again. It is as though one should strive to hold a live eel in one's hand for an hour, to stand waiting and doubting after the right time has come. And so I say that if we go not now, the way will never be found ; and go we must though it were by scaling the walls.'

Claudine looked at the massive stone walls, which rose high above her head, without much hope of release by that means—a cat could not have surmounted them. She turned her eyes away with a sigh, so deep as to tell of more despondency than she would readily have confessed. Louise echoed the impatient sigh, and they paced up and down beneath the wall for several moments, vainly recalling, for the twentieth time, every rejected plan of the last three days.

'Louise,' said Claudine, turning to her with sudden decision, 'come what may I am resolved to make the attempt this day. Yes,' she continued half-impatiently, as Louise glanced curiously all round her as though to see what new event had taken place to make her speak so decidedly, 'I know all the difficulties that lie before us ; yet there is surely some way by which we may surmount them. We will never leave this spot ; we will watch through the day near the gates, and surely soon or late some chance will occur to favour us. If not to-day, then to-morrow ; for I will not be outwearied in such a trial as this.'

Louise was not, perhaps, very hopeful of the favouring chance on which Claudine seemed willing to rely; yet she was in some measure infected by her mistress's confidence; and they returned within at once, in order to collect some small matters, which they had thought of as likely to be useful, that they might be ready to take advantage of the right moment, if it should arrive. Claudine collected all the little money and every small article of value she possessed; while Louise, who had long made herself familiar with all the offices of the place, had no difficulty in procuring from the buttery a little food, which she rightly judged they might stand in need of, should their plans succeed. She also provided a couple of hoods and cloaks belonging to two of the lay-sisters, which she thought not likely to be missed, and believed she could easily return to their places if they should not be wanted. These, she thought, would be useful for purposes of disguise to two women, so young, compelled to make a long journey alone.

Claudine felt a pang of regret, as she hurried through the corridors on her way to rejoin Louise without, that she might be upon the point of leaving the convent, for ever, without a word of explanation to Sister Rachel. To leave so kind a friend, not only without farewell, but in much anxiety respecting her, as she could not but know would be the case, should her hopes meet with the success, of which she was now rather unreasonably confident, was the only thing which could distress her in such a departure; but a meeting between them was impossible, and even if it had not been, Claudine would scarcely have sought it. She knew too well that she could hope for no encouragement from the kind sister, in a project she was determined not to abandon.

Claudine placed herself with Louise in a sheltered recess close by the great gateway, where they crouched down almost entirely concealed from observation themselves; though they could see all who went in or out, and everything that passed before them.

'See,' said Louise in a cautious undertone, as she showed the large shrouding hoods, 'here is what will

serve as a fine disguise if we were once without the walls. Now, Lady Claudine, if you laugh you may draw eyes upon us, which I would not have seen just now for fifty gold pieces.'

Claudine obeyed this hint, and they kept the long tedious watch in silence. It was early morning when they first took their station there, and for two or three hours nothing occurred to justify their hopes. Two or three times the gates were opened during this time; and Claudine could cast a longing gaze into the freedom of the outer scene divided from her by so small a space, but that was all. Louise began to weary and change her posture many times—was often, indeed, upon the point of proposing that they should give up so useless and tedious an endeavour; but Claudine never stirred; watching with the tension of strained expectation, while the sun, shining fitfully out of a cloudy sky, marked the day's advancement at intervals, upon the surrounding stones.

At length the gate was opened for the admission of a woman, who came laden with fish and eggs for the use of the kitchen. In entering she spoke to the portress in a few rapid words, and her communication appeared so interesting that the good woman fell into a momentary forgetfulness of her usual duties. With the open door in her hand she poured forth question upon question, which the new-comer answered, as it seemed, too laconically to satisfy her. Completely devoured by curiosity she followed the woman, who was in haste, upon her way to the kitchen-offices with her wares, forgetful or careless of the fact, that she had left the gate unlocked, and ajar. It is true that she had left her post for less than five minutes; and, as her face was towards the convent buildings during the whole time, she could scarcely have imagined that anyone could leave the place without passing her; but in those minutes Claudine had seen her opportunity. She shook Louise by the shoulder, sprang lightly up, and glided from her concealment, and through the gate, almost as swiftly and noiselessly as ghosts are feigned to walk. She felt, indeed, that it was no little risk she ran; but felt compelled, as though by an invisible

power, to take the action. Her anxiety was at first intense, lest her companion should not have time to follow her, though even should the portress turn round too soon, her well-known feebleness of sight was in their favour ; but Louise was both quick-witted and agile, and stood in an instant by the side of her mistress.

There remained only the danger that their light motions might have been heard in spite of the utmost caution, for the portress though dim of sight was by no means deaf ; but no disturbance followed, and they soon had the pleasure of hearing the grating of the lock, as the old woman complacently turned the key behind them.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CLAUDINE and Louise were at first scarcely able to breathe, from the excitement of the trying moment they had just passed through ; but after a few instants' pause, to recover from the flutter of agitation into which they had been thrown, the dread of observation made them hurry forward at their utmost speed. They ran on wondering, almost more than rejoicing, at this sudden stroke of good-fortune, as they thought it, but too breathless either to rejoice or wonder aloud until they reached the shelter of some tangled brush-wood, behind which they stopped for a short time ; and Louise, unrolling the bundle she had carried under her arm, proceeded to dress her lady, and herself, in the outer garments she had provided.

No two children, masquerading, ever laughed more merrily, than they as they wrapped this disguise around them.

'I can scarce credit it even yet, Louise,' said Claudine, panting and rosy from the hasty race ; 'after all our toil of thinking, and when I had begun almost to despair, that we should slip away as easily as a dove could fly over the high wall. I dread lest I should waken and find it a dream.'

‘Nay, it is sure enough,’ replied Louise; ‘but now the only thing I could grieve to have missed is a sight of the face of your lady aunt, when they carry her the tidings.’

‘That must not be for long yet,’ said Claudine, looking quickly round. ‘We must be some leagues further on our way before that time can come. But now that we have been confined so long, the free air will breathe double strength into our limbs; I feel almost as though I were on wings and could not tire. Which is the way that leads us to the castle? It is this! Come, Louise, let us not tarry here.’

Claudine’s spirits had risen to so high a pitch that she could not, if she would, have walked quietly and steadily. As it was, partly with an undefined fear of some pursuit, and partly with the same feeling of joy in her newly-won freedom which might have filled the breast of any wild forest thing, she ran on with never a pause, and scarcely feeling fatigue; until Louise, who had found some difficulty in keeping up the same rapid pace, was compelled to stop in a state almost of exhaustion. Claudine was obliged to stand still also; and now that her first excitement had in some measure cooled down, she had time to discover that she too was fatigued, and fell readily into a more quiet pace.

It was a cold cloudy day in early March, and the gusty wind swept over the country with a blighting influence, before which all the early tokens of approaching spring seemed to shrink and wither. It whistled through the still bare branches of the trees as dolefully as a November blast; and Claudine, heated with running, shivered as she felt it, drawing closely round her the ample folds of the cloak, which now seemed as useful for shelter as disguise. They walked on briskly, nevertheless, and still in the bright spirits, which seldom fail to cheer the beginning of a long and toilsome undertaking, however they may flag before its close.

Rough as the ground was over which they were obliged to pass, they thought little as yet of its inconveniences; though the waiting-maiden, at least, had little taste for such laborious exercise in general. Claudine’s disposition

was one of an unreflecting fearlessness, approaching dangerously to rashness ; and she now felt very little anxiety upon her unprotected state ; while even Louise, while the daylight lasted, was troubled by few of the fears, which might have seemed natural to two young girls, bound upon so long a journey alone.

An hour or two after leaving the convent, which stood just without a large and populous town, that fortunately did not lie in their course, they came upon a tract of sterile and desert ground, which grew in the summer time, waste deep in ferns and other rampant vegetation, but was now covered with very little growth of any kind ; but lay so deep in mud from the many heavy rains that had recently fallen, as to increase the difficulties of walking to an almost alarming extent. They struggled slowly on, tightly grasping each other's hands, and fearing every moment that they could no longer lift their feet from the ground. Had the mud been even a little deeper, they would most likely have been unable to proceed at all ; and as it was, their progress was so slow as severely to try the patience of Claudine, whose only desire was to advance as swiftly as possible.

They had not much cause to fear that they should be followed, at least so soon ; for they knew that from the lonely life they had been used to lead, and the little attention paid to them, especially in the somewhat confused state in which the convent then was, their disappearance was scarcely likely to be noticed for several hours. Claudine had been so often used to have her meals served to her in her own chamber by Louise, and was so much accustomed to wander alone into all the most unfrequented corners of the place, that no surprise could be excited by her not being found at any particular spot at a stated time ; and it seemed very probable that her absence might not be known before nightfall. Nevertheless, Claudine glanced continually over her shoulder to assure herself that she was not followed ; and showed almost as much impatience to move forward as though she saw a troop of horse gaining upon her at every instant, and burning to seize upon her and bear her back.

'Oh! Lady Claudine,' sighed Louise, whose courage was beginning to fail under toils and difficulties, which she had not had enough of reflection to foresee; 'we shall never struggle through this weary bog; I feel myself sinking at each instant, and to think of the long leagues we have yet to go!' She stopped short, indeed, as though convinced of the impossibility of moving a step further, and it was not without some persuasion that Claudine could draw her on.

'That which lies before is not worse than what we have passed already,' she said, inwardly rejoicing that the brawling brook that had almost overflowed its borders close by, did not come in their path, and that it would not be needful to drag Louise across it; 'if we have come through that, we may go yet farther. Courage, Louise; this bog does not stretch the whole way to our castle. See, yonder stand houses, trees, and cultured lands.'

Louise, who had been looking only at her feet, now glanced up, and seeing the tokens that seemed to promise better travelling, she was a little comforted, and consented to make one more effort.

'When we have passed through this desert place,' said Claudine, 'we must try to procure horses, or one at the least, whereby we may make our way with better ease as well as speed.'

This had been her design from the first, but she had feared to make the attempt while her whole mind was occupied by the anxiety to hurry as fast as possible from the close neighbourhood of the convent. This prospect also helped to reassure Louise, and she went on more cheerfully, and even began to converse.

'By my word, Lady Claudine,' she said, 'you take this adventure more lightly by far than I, till one would have said you had been used to trudge over hill and moorland each day with a load of market ware like any peasant maid. First you race me over the downs till I have no breath left to follow; and now you tread this marshy waste with as indifferent an air as though it were the floor of a marble palace; and draw me forward without pausing, while I am ready to sink upon the ground with weariness.'

'Thou art a simpleton, Louise,' replied Claudine. 'Didst thou think, when we first set out upon this journey, that there were none but smooth roads and pleasant ways before us? For me, I shall be well content if the end of our adventure bring us no worse fortune than has befallen us yet. We have met with nothing to hinder or turn us back from our path, though the sky may be a little unkindly.'

'Only that my forces seem to fail me more at every moment,' said Louise, still dolefully.

'Well, then,' said her mistress, yielding reluctantly to a trifling delay which she saw had become necessary for her companion, and perhaps feeling the need herself of a little repose; when we have passed this waste we will stay to take some rest under the shelter of those trees that stand yonder. That will restore us, and then we can go on merrily again.'

'I cannot answer for that,' returned Louise, half laughing now; 'for at this moment I feel as though, if I once cast myself on the earth, I should grow there, and never rise from it more.'

'Thou hast not dined, Louise,' said Claudine sagely. 'That provision in thy wallet will give thee better courage by-and-by. Now at last we are free of this bog, if thou wilt term it one.'

'And a plague upon it, too,' said Louise very heartily. 'It has taken us as long to cross, as all the way that we made before it.'

They now sat down, as Claudine had proposed, and Louise brought out her little store of such food, as she had most readily been able to find in the convent larder, at the Lent season. Prudence might have suggested that they should keep a part in reserve until later; but the provision was not excessive, and both young appetites were keen; moreover, as Claudine reflected, they might obtain more at need. During the repast, which was taken under the shelter of a cluster of beech-trees, that served for a screen from the biting wind, they talked and laughed with an abandonment, which formed a strong contrast to the forlorn appearance they had presented

half an hour before ; and after it was over, and they had rid themselves, so far as they could, of the mud that still clung to their garments, Louise found herself in much better case to proceed, justifying Claudine's prediction by setting forth again with a light step and a cheerful face ; so that they were able to journey with good courage at least, if not in the same overflowing spirits, with which they had started in the morning.

The country through which they had now to pass, was less wild and uncultivated, than the greater part of the tract that lay behind them ; cattle grazed by the wayside, most of the land had been tilled with all the care of which the rude agriculture of the time admitted ; and soon came human habitations, clustered together like a herd of timid wild creatures, who cling to each other for mutual defence.

It had been Claudine's fortune, until this time, to meet no one ; but now they saw several persons, peasants for the most part passing, to and fro with burdens on their backs, and labouring sadly in the fields ; or perhaps some solitary herdsman would turn from his cattle to gaze after them as they went by. Sometimes it was a group of weather-tanned, half-clad children, running with bare feet over the rough grass, while they tended geese or played among the pigs that were rooting over the commons ; and then, again, a stout country lass, carrying one milk-pail upon her head and another over her arm, and twirling a distaff as she went.

All these persons looked so curiously at the young lady and her companion, that Claudine was not a little embarrassed by it. Beyond the natural apprehension, felt by anyone anxious to escape observation, on finding herself the centre of so many eyes, the persistence of the open stare which met her at every turn, offended her in itself, and she pulled her hood over her face as far as it was possible ; while Louise, on the contrary, looked about her with lively smiles, not ill-pleased to fancy herself an object of attention.

It was scarcely to be wondered at if Claudine's appearance, at that moment, excited rather more of curiosity

and comment, than of respect. The pretty face, flushed with fatigue and excitement, and her complete form and bearing, according so ill with the dress she wore ; her soiled and travel-stained garments, which betrayed how far she had travelled on foot and unprotected, united with a certain air that seemed to place her above such a situation, all contributed to draw attention towards her. Louise, too, looked much better fitted to sustain her real station than her assumed one ; and altogether the aspect of the pair was strange enough to excuse the rough country folk, if they indulged in staring that was a little unmannerly, or even in outspoken comments, of which the most part did not reach Claudine. Those that did, however, caused her to redden to the ears with offended dignity, that she should be made the subject of such free remark, by those so far beneath her ; and she was not a little vexed on finding that she met with less respect than she was used to consider her due.

Claudine did not neglect, however, to watch carefully for any occasion of obtaining what she now much wished for—a horse, or some other means of finishing their journey more easily ; but no such chance came to her, neither did they pass by any place that seemed to promise what they wanted, even had they cared to stop to inquire for it. Louise looked rather disconsolate, and Claudine a little grave, when they found themselves, at the end of two or three hours, still on foot and almost beyond the more fertile tract of country, where they had hoped to supply their need. By this time they were both much tired, the day was beginning to decline, and, to add to their discomfort, a chilly rain began to fall, though not heavily. Both looked rather drearily towards the lonely expanse of moors and woods, which lay stretched out before them, till at last Claudine exclaimed more cheerily :

‘Come, Louise, take courage, we have walked fast and far, and the castle cannot now be far distant. We shall reach it, never fear that, soon enough after evening has fallen, and we shall not be forced to spend the night all entire in wandering through the rain, as thou sayest.

Indeed, we shall have little need of horses, as it seems to me, for the little way that is left.'

Claudine was so elated by the reflection that she must now be near her journey's end, that she scarcely regretted longer the necessity of completing it on foot; and, but for a prudent hint from her companion, she would certainly not have thought of trying to procure a further supply of food. They stopped a peasant girl whom they met, who filled a little flask, they had brought with them, with new milk, and gave them fresh-laid eggs, for which she thought herself only too highly paid by the small coin which Claudine dropped into her hand. This was all they could conveniently get, and they walked on with more or less courage into the lonely country they had to traverse. On they walked for yet several miles, while the evening drew nearer and nearer; Louise often sucking eggs as she went, in which she found some relief for toils and hardships, that began to weigh heavily upon her.

The ground to which they came at the end of some time, was no longer marshy, like that which they had crossed earlier in the day; but a sandy, sterile soil, scarcely yielding nourishment for the colonies of rabbits over whose burrows they had constantly to step. Nothing was to be seen on either side but this desert waste, diversified by occasional sand hills, clothed with a few stunted shrubs, and bordered at intervals by thick masses of firwood; which made Louise shiver with the dread of what dangers they might conceal. These, and the dull, gray sky stretched over their heads, were all that could be seen.

'Louise,' said Claudine, pausing after they had been walking thus for about the space of half an hour; 'for some time past my mind has misgiven me; can it be that we have wandered from our proper track? We should now, as I judge, be nearing the castle closely; yet I, who know every nook, glen, and hillock, almost every tree that lies around it, can find nothing familiar here. I know nought of this wilderness, nor of yonder gloomy firwoods.'

Louise looked all round her in alarm, and her eyes

grew wider as she gazed. The dreary scene was strange to her, yet she did not like to confess that it was so. We feel more lost and lonely in a desolate place, after the open admission that we have gone astray.

‘Look, Louise,’ continued her lady steadily, though with a growing shadow of fear in her eyes ; ‘think and aid me. Dost thou know those sandhills in the distance, this deep hollow that lies beneath us, or that belt of dark trees that skirts the waste upon the west?’

‘I know nothing, I know nothing,’ cried Louise almost in terror ; ‘Oh, what had we to do, to wander out into a desert to perish there?’

Both were silent during some moments, while the certainty grew upon them, more and more strongly, that they had lost their way. The dusk was quickly coming on, and the dreaded approach of night found them not as they had hoped, among well-known scenes, and near the end of their journey ; but in the midst of a wilderness which might hold undreamed-of dangers, and they knew not how far from their proper path.

‘I know not how we can have wandered,’ said Claudine, ‘for the way is known both to thee and me. Didst thou not tell me it was the fourth time of crossing it?’

This was quite true ; but Louise, whose disposition was too volatile to observe or remember with much distinctness, might have made the same journey twenty times without fitting herself for the charge of a guide. At this moment she was so occupied with exclamations of despair, and in calling upon the Virgin, and all the saints she could think of, to witness their distress, that Claudine could draw nothing from her, and was forced to turn back to her own reflections. Striving as far as possible to silence the fears which threatened to overmaster her, she gazed thoughtfully back over the way by which they had come, and tried to recall her rather confused memories of the proper route.

‘We cannot surely have strayed far out of our way,’ she said musingly, ‘for I remember well the spot we passed ; it cannot be two hours gone, and the castle that towered upon a height in the far distance. It was the

very place where Bertram drew rein, when we came from the castle first, and where we stayed to make our repast upon the grass. Come, let us turn and go back as we came, till we reach that spot again.

Louise, whose little stock of courage had at last completely given way, was weeping unrestrainedly, and wringing her hands in despair; and now, in answer to Claudine's urgent appeals, she threw herself upon the ground, bidding her lady leave her to herself, for she had done all that mortal strength could do. She was ready, she said, to die in that place, but she could not, and would not, go one step farther. Claudine, however great her distress and alarm might be, was too proud to display her feelings so openly, and would not despond. The plan of their escape had been her own; and she would not yet tell herself that it had failed. She stood for some moments by the side of Louise, trying vainly to persuade or reason her out of this state of utter despondency.

'We shall, at least, be safer,' she said, 'if we can leave this desert plain, and draw nearer to some peopled land. Think, Louise, the night is coming down, and what can we do here alone and desolate? Do we know what dangers may lurk within these woods?'

At this moment a crackling and rustling, either heard or fancied, among the trees close beside them, the swaying of their branches in the uncertain light, and the shrill call of some wild bird that haunted the firwood, struck such terror into the mind of Louise as effected more than all her lady's entreaties. Springing to her feet, she ran so swiftly from the place that Claudine found it at first difficult, and almost painful, to keep pace with her, or to keep her in the direction she wished. When this sudden access of fear had passed over, they still continued to walk on as quickly as they could, anxious, if possible, to reach the margin of that sandy tract before the gathering darkness closed them completely round. Whether it were, however, that they had advanced further into the plain than they had before supposed, or that they now strayed wide of their purpose, night came on and found them still wandering there.

The rain had for some time almost ceased to fall, and at length the clouds parted, permitting the moon to shine out clearly. Claudine and her companion looked carefully all round the horizon, hoping to see some more hopeful signs than when the last gray of twilight had faded, but the scene remained unchanged. Still the gloomy woods, the distant sandhills, and the dreary sterile plain, were the only objects which met the sight.

'It is all in vain, Lady Claudine, it is all in vain,' said Louise wildly. 'We are lost and hopeless, and can do no more. What is the profit if we wander here till day-dawn? Let us lie down here, at least, and whether it be to fall a prey to wild beasts, or wilder men, I cannot care longer. We are broken with toil and distress.'

Further exertion did, indeed, seem at this time useless, and Claudine quietly suffered her companion to sink upon the ground and rest; herself sitting down by her side. Louise now gave herself up to weeping and incoherent lamentation; and at last, pulling forth her string of beads, she began to murmur over her prayers half-aloud, and as fast as her lips could move, as though she dreaded an instant's silence. Claudine sat perfectly still, with her cloak thrown over her head, while she tried to grasp the realities of their past and present position. Now, for the first time, she felt fully how rash and childish her action had been, in exposing herself to all the risks of so long a journey, with no better protection than Louise could give, when neither had even a sufficiently distinct knowledge of the way they must take. Claudine had retained many of her childish impulses, in spite of her seventeen years; and though Louise, as several years the elder, might have been expected to guide her to more prudence and caution, she was herself too giddy, and thoughtless, to have used her influence for such a purpose.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THEIR situation had now, in truth, become almost terrible, and though Claudine was far from being aware of the

full extent of the peril, to which two young girls, alone in such a place, in the darkness of night must be exposed, she understood enough of it to fill her heart with terror, if it was kept under more control than that of her attendant. The courage for which she had striven hard through all the trials of that long and toilsome day did now, indeed, almost desert her, and the poor child wept silently in her fear and desolation ; while hiding her face from the sight of the barren prospect, which seemed only to press the sense of her abandonment more closely upon her. The wind, which still blew high, but not so keenly as it had done in the morning, wailed and moaned around them, with a sound so mournful that it was perhaps scarcely to be wondered at, if Louise mistook it for the lamentation of disembodied spirits, and shivered and cowered with a sense of something more than physical chillness. Claudine listened with painful earnestness to every sound that came by chance upon the wind, lest some unforeseen danger should approach them without warning ; but dared not once look up to meet the sight of it. The clouds had again darkened the sky, and seemed to threaten another heavy shower, which was, however, long held suspended.

The murmuring voice of Louise, after a considerable space of time, sank into silence, and Claudine, who found in it a species of support, as assuring her, at least, of some human fellowship, spoke to her once or twice that she might hear her voice again ; but was surprised to discover that the girl, exhausted as well by her terrors and her distress as by the unaccustomed exertions to which she had been compelled, and used, in some degree, to her present position, had fallen into an uneasy sleep. Claudine herself proposed to watch carefully, and for some time her fears kept her wakeful ; but as no events seemed to justify these fears, their power over her gradually decreased, and at last she, too, slumbered. In her dreams she wandered again, for what seemed an almost endless time, over wild and difficult ground, such as her weary feet had just measured ; but it was not, in reality, very long before she started awake in a sudden

affright, and sprang to her feet with a stifled cry at the touch of a hand which was laid upon her shoulder.

By the imperfect and half-obsured light, which the moon shed through the clouds, Claudine saw that the figure by her side was that of a man, whose wild and almost savage aspect seemed well-fitted to increase her natural fears. He carried a bow and a club, and was clad in a kind of shaggy cloak, which seemed to have been made from the skin of some wild beast; while the dead body of some small quadruped was slung over his shoulder. These equipments, together with his huge unkempt beard and matted hair, were all that Claudine's frightened eyes could take note of at first in the person of this new-comer, who stood gazing upon her in wonder for several moments; his more practised sight probably taking in more of the details of her appearance, than she was able to do of his own. Louise still slept; and Claudine scarcely breathed during this moment of startled expectation. Her first wild impulse had been to fly from him, but, overcoming it, she stood still, showing no outward sign of fear, till he at last spoke:

'Who are you?' he said somewhat gruffly, and in a strange uncouth dialect which Claudine could with difficulty understand.

'I am the lady of the Baron de Drumont,' replied she, covering her apprehension beneath a rather haughty carriage, 'who has gone astray in these wilds for lack of a guide.'

The man answered only by an ejaculation, which appeared to express surprise and suspicion in about an equal degree; then, after a long look, he turned away, muttering between his teeth some words which she could not hear. Claudine listened with relief to his retreating footsteps, and sank down again in her former posture by the side of Louise, scarcely able to believe herself so easily free from a danger which had well-nigh made her blood run cold. Rejoicing that her companion had not been awakened, and feeling no further inclination to sleep herself, she sat watching the figure of the man, as he

walked slowly away ; until he at length turned, and came to her again.

‘Come,’ he said, with a gesture of invitation, and in a tone which seemed meant to be reassuring. She looked up in alarm, but made no answer, and he repeated more loudly : ‘Come with me !’ at the same time taking her by the arm as though to assist her to rise.

Claudine stood up tremblingly, and looked earnestly towards him who addressed her ; but in the dim light it was impossible to read his countenance or divine his purpose.

‘We are unhappy travellers,’ she said simply, and summoning all her courage for the reply ; ‘do not seek to do us harm.’

‘I will give you shelter in my cave,’ he answered shortly.

For some moments Claudine hesitated. Could she place herself in the hands of one so entirely unknown, and in whose whole aspect and bearing, no less than in the time and place of the encounter, there seemed so much to justify distrust ? On the other hand, it might be dangerous to refuse his demands ; was she not in his power even now, as completely as she could be in consenting to follow him ? Then, too, the very name of shelter had a pleasant sound, and the bewildered girl eagerly welcomed any prospect of guidance, which might lead her away from that dreary waste. She wakened Louise that she might seek counsel ; but the waiting-maiden had no sooner opened her startled eyes to the sight of a grim-looking man standing beside her mistress, than she sent forth scream after scream of undisguised terror, and, seizing upon Claudine’s robe, made hasty signs to her to fly from so dangerous a neighbourhood. The man gave a low growl which appeared expressive of displeasure, but did not speak ; Claudine strove in vain to pacify the frightened girl.

‘Hush, hush, Louise,’ she whispered ; ‘I think, I trust, that all is well. This man, as I believe, however rugged his aspect, hath no design to harm us, but to succour

rather. Do but hold thy peace, for the love of Heaven, and show no fear, or thou mayest anger him.'

'Lady Claudine! oh, Lady Claudine!' cried the half-distracted girl aloud, as she threw her arms tightly round her lady, 'what would you do? Oh, do not follow him, for the love of the blessed Virgin; he seeks but to lead us to some secret place, where he may spoil and murder us at his will! Let us keep the open plain!'

'I shall not harm thee, silly maid,' growled the stranger. 'Lady, if thou wilt, follow me.'

Claudine asked whether he could guide them into their proper path on the morrow, adding that she could reward his service. He assented, and then, as though impatient of delay, turned to walk away with hasty strides; while Claudine, who had now taken her decision, followed quietly, trying to calm the fears of Louise, whom she drew on with her.

'If his purpose were of violence,' she said, speaking in guarded tones lest she might be overheard, 'he might have wreaked it long ere this. Moreover, I feel, though I know not why, well-inclined to place trust in him. Take courage, Louise, and think that had we stayed, a worse encounter might have chanced to us.'

These and many other similar reasonings somewhat consoled Louise, who now followed her mistress submissively; and found comfort in thinking that they were at least making their way across the bewildering plain. Yet she repeated 'Aves' all the way as she walked after her still distrusted guide, for what seemed to her a great distance; and, indeed, she was surprised to find how much further she was able to go after she had thought herself completely exhausted. Claudine could scarcely be said to trust herself, without some feelings of anxiety, to her unknown conductor; but her native trustfulness, no less than her innocence, served to shield her from any painful degree of alarm.

Their conductor walked on in front without speaking, only turning his head now and then to assure himself that he was followed; while they were obliged to use some little exertion to keep him in sight; for he made no

attempt to suit his hasty strides to their convenience, until he was several times compelled to pause that they might come up with him. He led them out of the plain, and they soon found themselves among rocky heights where the sound of falling water was to be heard, and where they had sometimes no little difficulty in scaling the steep stony path, by which he led them.

Claudine felt now, as she had done many times before on that day, the advantage of the hardy and active habits in which she had been reared ; but both she and Louise had begun to find these renewed exertions distressing and almost painful, when at last, after a walk of something less than two hours, their conductor stopped before the mouth of a cavern, almost concealed in the side of a large rock ; and, holding aside the bushes which shaded the opening, bid them enter. Louise drew back in shrinking alarm when she saw the nature of the lodging offered them, her mind divided in about an equal degree between the fear of evil magic, or ruthless plunderers in human shape ; but Claudine knew that it was now too late to draw back. Within the last few moments rain had again begun to fall in such heavy torrents, as to make the idea of any shelter still more welcome ; they were overcome by cold and exhaustion ; and the young lady, drawing on her reluctant companion, entered courageously, though her heart beat.

The darkness was so thick within the cave, that they could at first see nothing of what surrounded them ; but their saturnine host raked together and revived a few dying embers, that still glowed dully upon the ground, and, heaping dry fuel upon the fire, had soon lighted the cave in its farthest corner by the red glow of the leaping flames. Claudine and Louise found themselves scarcely able to breathe at first, as the column of smoke came pouring forth ; but the master of this primitive dwelling made them pass to the other side, and approach the fire more closely. Here they were obliged to seat themselves on the ground, while they tried to warm their chilled and stiffened limbs, and to dry their damp clothing. As they did so their eyes turned, by a common consent, towards

the face of their swarthy conductor, with better opportunity than before for studying its expression.

He appeared to be a man of the lowest class, in whose appearance there was yet more evidence of wildness and neglect, than was common with the greater number of his fellows. There was something, which resembled the shy suspicious glance of some wild beast of the forest in the shifting expression of his dark eye ; there was something in his whole bearing that seemed to speak of a solitary and half-savage life—the life of one who held little or no converse with his fellows.

This was all, or nearly all, that could be gleaned from his countenance ; yet Claudine felt her trembling confidence in him rather strengthened than shaken ; for there was nothing either cruel or treacherous in his eye, which seemed rather to rest upon them in kindness. His age would have been hard to determine with accuracy, and it was probably less advanced than it appeared to be ; for hard toil, and it might be much misery, seemed to have done the work of years upon his rugged features ; while his frame was yet muscular and active, though gaunt and ungainly.

The man regarded Claudine, for a few moments, with no less attention than she looked at him, and still with a kind of dull wonder ; but at last he turned away, and began to busy himself with some preparation for their refreshment. In the meantime Claudine, and Louise, glanced with a fearful curiosity round the cavern, which was certainly a place that seemed better fitted for such unholy rites of magic, as the fancy of Louise had brought before her, than for the dwelling of any Christian man. It was wider and more lofty than they had at first supposed, but almost completely bare of all articles of use or convenience. Here a wolf-skin, flung over a heap of dried leaves, formed a rude couch ; and there a little store of coarse provisions had been heaped together ; while a large earthen jar containing water stood close to them. Nothing was there, which seemed to belong of right to the den of an outlawed robber, still less to the saintly retirement of the hermit's cell.

Louise shrank closer to the side of her lady, and laid her hand upon her garments, as she strained her eyes into every shadowy corner ; but the grateful warmth of the fire was a comfort not to be despised, and which might well compensate a little fear ; and the preparations of their host soon gave her reason to expect a more solid repast, than could be furnished by raw eggs. He cut—or rather hacked—some thick slices from a piece of boar's-flesh, which he then hastily broiled upon the live embers, and offered to them, with the accompaniment of a little black bread, so coarse and dry, that it was with some difficulty they could swallow it. The smoked, half-cooked meat, served in so rude a fashion, and taken from such hands, formed a meal of which Claudine could eat but sparingly, while her companion regarded it with yet more disfavour ; but their host had no attention to bestow upon them, but sat tearing and devouring huge quantities of flesh, without even a glance in their direction.

When at last his hunger was appeased, he rose slowly, and brought fresh wood to feed the fire ; and it was at this moment that a smothered cry was heard, which caused Claudine and Louise to start, and look at each other almost in terror. The man went to one corner of the cave, and lifting what appeared to be a bundle, brought it to his former station before the fire. Then Claudine saw with astonishment that what he held was no bundle, but an infant of scarcely a twelvemonth old, closely swathed and bound. He held it tightly in his arms, with a seeming wish to hide it from other eyes ; and looked upon it with the same fierce affection, which a bear or wolf might display for her cubs.

He then carried it to a distant corner, from which they soon heard the bleating of a goat ; and spent several moments apparently in the vain attempt to obtain milk for it, but finding that none could be had, he returned slowly with the already half-famished child, rocking it backwards and forwards as before. As it did not cease its crying, he took a piece of bread and attempted to feed it, first moistening the food between his own lips, and then placing it in the mouth of the infant. Claudine and

Louise watched this scene in unutterable surprise, but at last a feeling of compassion for the helpless creature, abandoned to so rough a protector, rose uppermost in their minds, and Louise, having recollected a little milk that still remained in her flask, Claudine took it from her, and advancing timidly she knelt down beside her strange guardian, and endeavoured to feed it by means of a spoon which hung at her girdle. The man looked at her at first with a jealous suspicion, but when he noted the pleasure with which the child sucked in the healthful and natural nourishment he gave way to her readily ; and even suffered her after a time to take his burden from him, and hold it on her own lap. The two women bent over it, with all the pleasing interest which minds, suddenly freed from a weight of apprehension, can throw into the smallest of surrounding objects ; for no circumstance could possibly have quieted their fears so fully, as the sight of the care of their host for this babe. Together they unbound its wrappings, and let it stir its limbs freely ; they fed it, they hushed it, and Louise rocked it in her arms till it fell asleep upon her breast.

Claudine had now gained so much confidence that she ventured to question her protector upon his strange course of life, which had filled her with the keenest curiosity. He answered shortly and with great unwillingness ; but she succeeded in gleanings that he was a serf, who had fled to this solitary place as a refuge from the barbarous tyrannies of his lord, and had dwelt for two years in this cave, gaining his livelihood almost completely by means of his bow and his agility in the chase. His wife, who had at first shared his retreat, had died a few months since, and left him with the infant, now his sole companion. This was all that she could learn ; and it needed some time and patience before so much could be drawn from the solitary man, reserved as he was through suspicion, and silent from the constant habit of his lonely life.

Claudine then asked anxiously whether he could procure them horses for the morrow's journey ; at the same time drawing forth her purse to assure him that means should

not be wanting. His eyes glistened in the half light as they fell upon it, and he made a sign of assent ; then rose and walked to and fro for a short time, while Claudine watched his passing shadow with dreamy eyes, which threatened at every moment to close in sleep.

The night was by this time far advanced ; and the man suddenly returning to the fire bid them lie down upon the heap of skins and leaves that served him for a bed, whither they carried the child, which, seeing their care for it, he had quietly suffered them to retain. Claudine found the bed, on which she now lay, as soft and luxurious as any where she had ever stretched her limbs, and it was not for long that she lay gazing at the fire, and watching the uncouth figure that bent over it ; the fatigue which excitement and anxiety had overpowered for a time, returned upon her with double force, and she slept, if less sweetly, still more profoundly, than the infant that now lay within her arms.

The man sat long without stirring by the side of the fire, as it flickered and blazed and sank alternately ; and it would not have been easy to judge, as his head drooped forward on his breast, whether he mused or slept. Suddenly he left his station, and coming up close to the side of his guests, he gazed upon them as long and earnestly as though he could distinguish the expression, or even the form, of those who lay in that darkened corner. Presently he lifted his hand and approached it gently to Claudine's breast, but as it fell upon the child, which murmured slightly in its sleep, he withdrew it, and after looking down at the bed and its occupants one or two moments longer, turned away, and began slowly to pace the cave in its length and breadth, many times. He went often to the door of the cave, to look out at the sky in a seeming impatience for the dawn, and then returned to the almost dying fire ; and so the night wore away, while he never seemed to feel the need of rest.

Claudine was oppressed by more than one dream, recalling more or less strongly the events of the day before. One showed her Bertram standing upon a steep and difficult height, and with great toil and no little peril, she

tried to climb towards him. Often slipping, and in great fear of falling, she had slowly and painfully made half her way, when she found herself wandering in a huge cavern that seemed to have no outlet. All around her she saw and touched nothing but stone, and could never make her way to Bertram, though she heard his voice shouting overhead. Another time she found herself sitting in the middle of a great plain, and a bear came to her, from which she tried to fly, but could not. The bear forced her to follow to its den, and she followed through tangled ways till she reached the place, when she sank down exhausted and lay among the cubs. At last a blaze of light seemed almost to blind her eyes, and starting suddenly, she found her host beside her, grasping her by the arm and pointing towards the mouth of the cavern, through which the morning sun shed his full brightness.

Claudine went instantly to look out upon the morning, and then, turning to her honest guardian, pressed the whole of her little treasure into his hand, bidding him only find her the means of finishing her journey, and all should be his. He hesitated, and mused for a moment: then, casting a last look round the cave, went out, leaving the young lady to return to the bed, on which she had left Louise still slumbering with the infant. Claudine's waking dreams, as she lay in the sunshine, were as happy as those of the night had been distressing. Her way was clear now, she thought, for all that she had wished—the old home lay before her, and her life of the last year should be nothing more to her than the dreams from which she had just wakened. Soon, however, she grew impatient of her silent thoughts, and awoke Louise, that she might have someone to talk with.

'We shall have no more fears to-day, Louise,' she said brightly. 'We shall find our right way again, and to-day we shall reach the castle. I promise thee, Louise, that never until yesterday had I taken thee for such a faint heart. Yet I will confess that my own heart was near failing me more than once. But morning has now come, and see how the sun shines upon us!'

‘And I am sure it is more than ever I looked for,’ said Louise, ‘to come out alive from this wolf’s den.’

‘Ah, ah, Louise,’ replied Claudine, laughing : ‘the road to safety was through the wolf’s den : so now thou mayst see that it is not always well to fly from what wears the face of danger.’

‘I will think upon that,’ said Louise ; ‘and the next time I meet a river I will walk straight into it.’

A cry from the child interrupted this trifling, and both turned towards it.

‘I will keep this babe, if I may,’ said Claudine, as she fondled it ; ‘and breed it up to love me. Its father, too, I must think what may be done to mend his state. Without his harbourage and honest guardianship, how know we what might have befallen us ? Thy father is a brave guide, little one,’ she went on, tossing the infant in her arms ; ‘he drew us from our distress, and the noble Baron will not forget him.’

Claudine now laid the child down, and, springing up, both she and Louise employed themselves in putting their dress into such order as was then possible.

‘I marvel at his long delay,’ said Claudine, shaking out the thick mass of her hair, which Louise tried without much success to straighten and arrange for her ; ‘he said he would be speedy. Look out, Louise, and see whether anyone comes.’

But again and again they looked forth in vain.

‘Indeed, Lady Claudine,’ said Louise, returning from the opening for the sixth time ; ‘if you have given your purse into his hand, it will be well if we ever see him again at all ; if he do not ride off with the booty, and leave us to pine here till we find a way out for ourselves.’

‘This is nought but folly,’ said Claudine ; ‘have we had cause to doubt of him ?’

Still her spirits were a little damped by the delay, and she took her stand at the mouth of the cave to watch the path in silence.

‘Now, now, Louise,’ she eagerly cried ; ‘he is climbing up the rock, and he leads two horses by the halter.’

‘The saints be praised !’ said Louise ; ‘now, if the

good man of this hostelry will but spare us such a breakfast as was his supper of last night, we may indeed be soon upon our way.'

They threw on their cloaks, and ran to meet their guide, whose long absence, as they now perceived was due only to the difficulties he had found in fulfilling their wishes. The two hacks he had brought for their use, were certainly sorry jades enough, and their appointments anything but perfect, yet Claudine had never in her life mounted a horse with greater pleasure ; while Louise felt a great satisfaction in the thought that the animal on whose back she was lifted, by their protector, looked very unlikely to prove restive, to plunge or kick or run away with her, of all which disasters she stood in mortal terror.

Claudine had engaged her host of the past night to act as their guide during the first part of the way ; and he accordingly led them out from the desolate tract in which they had been so unhappily bewildered, and into the more frequented ways. Then, pointing with his finger that the way lay straight before them, he was turning to retrace his steps, but Claudine sought to detain him.

'Do not quit us,' she said ; 'I would bring thee with me to the castle of the Baron de Drumont, that I may better reward thy service.'

The man shook his head impatiently.

'I live in the dark,' he said ; 'moles do not love the light,' and, turning away, he was soon lost to their sight.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE sun had risen high, and pointed almost to the hour of noon, when Bertram, on his homeward journey, found his course interrupted by a river, which flowed directly across the track. He rode slowly along its banks, looking for a passage by which it might be forded ; and, glancing to the other side as he went, saw two women mounted

upon heavy-footed hackneys, who were approaching gradually from the opposite direction. His eyes dwelt carelessly upon them for some moments, noting their aspect, their air, the very folds of their garments as they fluttered in the wind. They were clad in something resembling conventual garb, and seemed so deeply engaged in converse between themselves, that they had no attention to spare for the scene around them.

At length, however, they looked up, and suddenly stood still for a moment, intently regarding the party which was advancing slowly on the other side of the stream : then Bertram heard what seemed a cry of gladness, which made him, too, stop abruptly in his course. As he stood gazing earnestly towards the two female figures, who fixed his attention strangely, he saw one force her horse recklessly into the water in the attempt to cross to the other side of the river, while her companion, who remained upon the bank, was wringing her hands and screaming in an agony of terror. The stream was not in this place of great width, neither was it very deep at ordinary times ; but it had been swollen by recent rains, and the strength of the current was great enough to make the attempt to cross it at this spot one of no little danger, especially for an inexperienced girl. Bertram for one instant of surprised consternation watched the terrified animal plunging wildly in the water, and his now frightened rider trying in vain to restrain and guide him. It seemed as though the horse would never be able to resist the rush of the current, but must inevitably be swept away by it.

‘My lord has found favour in the eyes of the dames of late,’ whispered a pert young page ; ‘see there now, through water or through fire they will fly towards him.’

‘Have done with thy prating,’ returned he who was addressed, who saw farther than his companion ; ‘there is more in this than thy dull wits can fathom.’

Bertram heard neither the jibe nor the answer. He had already spurred to the river’s edge and entered the stream, encouraging his horse by hand and voice to struggle on towards the other animal, making fruitless

efforts to support himself in mid-stream. The way was not long, and the powerful charger, better fitted by strength and spirit for the task, and well used to obey the hand that guided him, succeeded in a few moments in reaching the spot : and Bertram, hastily snatching from the saddle the female form which he feared to see swept away at every instant, turned his horse with no little difficulty, and swam back again towards the opposite bank, holding Claudine tightly in his arms. It was in the course of this progress, slow and hazardous as it was, that all his fevered fancies quickly died away, and he saw clearly again ; and he knew that the child companion clinging to him now in so much gladness and confidence, who had sought him through so many toils and dangers, was more to him than any other in the world. He did not concern himself yet, to wonder how she had come to him, but only held her fast, feeling that they should not be divided again ; yet with a thrill of alarm, and half of self-reproach, at the thought of how near he might have been to casting away from him a blessing, which he now knew how to value better.

When she was set down in safety on the bank, Claudine, far from showing any signs of alarm or agitation, only shook the water from her draggled garments and her hair ; and laughed as gleefully as though she had but wet her feet, in childish play, as she crossed some shallow brook.

‘ Ah, Claudine,’ said Bertram, catching the contagion of her smiles as he looked into her happy eyes, ‘ I might, indeed, have known who it was that rode to me straight through the risen waters like a giddy-brain, and could not wait for a ford. Ay, we may well be thankful that this pretty head is not lying low among the sedges ere this.’

Claudine could only laugh again with gladness as she clung with her two hands to his arm.

‘ So thou hast come to me again ?’ said Bertram, looking at her proudly and fondly ; ‘ they had told me that thou hadst learned to forget the old castle, and all that was in it.’

‘ Then they told you false,’ she replied, ‘ and even so did they say to me, that I should be forgotten and find no

welcome there. And yet I have come, though they would have stayed me.'

'And come to find the welcome yet warm,' said Bertram in a low tone. He was full almost of wonder as he looked at her, how great was her trust in him.

They had stood a while upon the bank at some distance from his companions, but Bertram very soon, mindful of the necessity of pursuing their way, rejoined his party and rode forward, holding Claudine upon his own horse, for hers had been drowned in the stream, and he would not let her go. As they went, he asked and obtained from her a full account of all that had occurred to her of late, and especially of her hasty flight; and he almost shuddered at the image of the many dangers which she had boldly and innocently risked.

'Oh Claudine, Claudine, when wilt thou ever cease to be a child?' he exclaimed, as he listened to her story. When it was ended, he said again gravely, as he had said months before: 'Claudine, we must be married!' and this time she did not gainsay his desire.

Upon that very day, after a delay of no more hours than necessity compelled, their union was completed for the second time, with as much haste and as little ceremonial, as it had been on the first occasion; with no marriage guests or marriage banquet; no pomp of attendance or sumptuous attire; but in a little humble chapel which they passed upon their way, and with none to witness it but Louise—who was left screaming at the river-side, but had crossed at the ford—and one or two whom Bertram had chosen to be with them.

'Now,' said Bertram, as he drew his wife close to him—'now art thou mine and none shall steal thee away. Now thou canst never fly from me again.'

'And do I wish to fly?' said Claudine, with a smile as proud as his own.

He brought her home, and she rested under the old roof that night, happy with a happiness that brought almost as much bewilderment as pleasure at first. Margery, who was now an aged old woman and nearly bed-ridden, welcomed her child with even more than her old affection,

struggling to throw her feeble and nearly paralysed arms around her, and almost crying over her as she knelt by the bedside.

‘I knew,’ she said, fondling Claudine’s hand in hers—‘I knew that my lost dove would fly back one day to her old nest, but I have waited long for her.’

‘The nest was soft and warm,’ said Claudine gently ; —‘and the dove fretted against the bars of her cage.’

The old woman held her hand fast, and kept her there while she made her repeat all that had befallen her within the last year and more ; nor did Margery ever seem quite content until the time of her death, which took place no long time afterwards, unless she had her young mistress by her side.

The Prioress had not been so entirely regardless of the welfare of her niece as to feel no alarm at her sudden disappearance, or make no efforts for her recovery. She had, indeed, sent in search of her within a few hours after her quitting the convent ; and it is not likely that Claudine would have succeeded in reaching the castle before being overtaken, but for the accident of her having strayed from the proper path, which she had done earlier than she was aware of. The messengers who had taken the direct way to the castle, as the only place to which it could be supposed she had fled, arrived there, in fact, a considerable time before Bertram reached it ; and were not a little surprised and disappointed to find that they had absolutely failed in the object of their search. Bertram, on his arrival, found the whole castle in excitement from the reception of these visitors, and the news which they brought.

It was long before the Prioress recovered from the vexation and chagrin, which overcame her at the time that Claudine left her for ever ; and she never thought of asking herself whether her regret was caused by affection for her niece, or the disappointment of her own cherished projects. She never ceased, indeed, to lament over Claudine’s now irrevocable union with the Baron de Drumont ; as well as the discomfiture of her own nephew ; until the latter met his death, a short time afterwards, in a

single combat, to which he had come so far from sober, that he was scarcely master of his weapon, and fell an easy prey to his adversary.

Claudine would gladly have found again the man who had sheltered her in his cave, and lent her such timely aid, when she was bewildered in the night ; but no search could succeed in discovering his retreat. Many caverns and rocky fastnesses were explored ; but whether it was that Claudine had not clear enough knowledge of the path, by which she had left the place, or that the man himself had sought some other retreat, jealous and fearful of the strange eyes which had pried into his hiding-place, every effort was fruitless. Some years afterwards, however, a little girl, miserably clad, presented herself before Claudine, babbling, in a jargon scarcely comprehensible, that her father had sent her there ; that he said the great lady would take her in ; for that she would remember the night when it was cold on the plains, and he had warmed her in his cave. On asking the child of her father, Claudine could learn nothing but that he was dead ; but in the firm belief that this was the infant she had found with her preserver, and had before wished to take her for her own, she kept and reared the child ; making her in time an attendant upon her daughters.

So Claudine settled down again happily in the old nest, having tried her wings and found that they showed her only the dangers of the world beyond. A peaceful content had come to her with the growth of a more developed reason and affection ; and she found her chief pride and pleasure in those womanly employments and graces, which she had now learned to love ; until little sons and daughters came, to bring her a yet deeper and more lasting source of delight. Neither had Bertram ever any reason to dread the return of those clouds and mists, which had darkened his thoughts for a time, and threatened, as he thought, to shadow his life ; for the sun which had risen to dispel them, grew in place and power, till it had filled his mind with the broad light of noon-day.

PART II.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE passage of nearly thirty years, had wrought little or no change in the outward aspect of the scene, which met the eyes of the Baroness de Drumont, as she raised them every now and then from the elaborate work, with which she was trying to wile away the long hours of a lonely afternoon, and looked down from the window beside which she sat. It was only in her own altered air and features that the progress of time was at all apparent ; but there, in her fast-whitening hair and rather careworn countenance ; in the downward droop of her mouth, which had replaced the dimples that once played about the corners ; and in the weariness that lay at this moment in eyes, from which half the brightness had faded, might be read the marks of greater change, than the lapse of even so long a period should have brought. Claudine de Drumont looked already worn and almost old—very old for one whose age still wanted several years of fifty ; and in the spare and somewhat dejected figure of the woman who sat alone, clad in sombre black velvet, in the far end of this spacious chamber, few would have recognised even a resemblance to the spirited girl of former days.

The mind of the lady of the castle was very busy with old memories just then ; and it was, perhaps, in order to indulge them with the less danger of interruption, that she had dismissed her women, and chosen to sit alone on this dreary afternoon, when the desolate howling of the wind, and the sullen darkness of the sky, made the time

seem more fitting for cheerful companionship. Her fingers grew idle as she sat dreaming over her own past, and the future of her children ; and while recalling the distresses and anxieties, which had fallen to her during the past years, she perhaps forgot to include the many seasons of happiness which had marked them ; for her reflections took a more and more saddened tone.

Life in the world, she told herself, was hard and perplexing—hard at least, to a woman. The ceaseless cares of the wife and mother ; long partings ; frequent loneliness and suspense ; and the burden of responsibilities too heavy for feeble shoulders, had weighed down her spirit, and she was weary long before she had grown old. Yes, she was glad that her daughter had made a different choice and was already vowed to the cloister ; surely that was the more peaceful path. She herself would be counted—and had been, she knew—a rarely happy wife ; and yet she would not have chosen the same lot for her Claudine.

As she thought further, however, and tried to decide whether she could herself have accepted her daughter's present life, she again recoiled from it ; and knew that not even to escape all the fears or sufferings she had undergone, on their account, would she have renounced husband and children, and the freer, wider life which had been open to her.

'It is because Bertram is away,' she half-exclaimed aloud, as she tried to banish the unusually gloomy thoughts that possessed her. 'But for his absence these last years had never seemed so weary and so sad. Nought will ever go right till he is with us again. Four years—four years, and scarce a word !'

But this was a hopeless subject, and before long the mother's mind had returned to her remaining children—to her sickly son ; her poor boy, as she still called the youth, in age though not in stature a man ; the prospect of whose future had ever seemed so doubtful and cheerless. She had thought him more failing than usual of late ; and great as her tenderness was for this child, the least favoured by nature among them all, she often felt her pride wounded to the quick as she noted the many

graces in which he was lacking, and felt herself the mother of a nerveless weakling. She had so longed that her husband might have pride and joy in her sons.

Then there was Agnes, the daughter who still remained, her youngest and favourite child, who had lately cost her many anxious thoughts. The docile, clinging girl, who seemed formed for sheltered happiness as though she must wither under disappointment and distress; her mother saw, or thought she saw, dark shadows threatening her future path. Had not the shadows begun to fall already? she asked herself sadly.

Raymond—his image brought even a deeper sigh than that of the weakly younger brother.

‘And these are Bertram’s sons,’ she said to herself, with some bitterness. ‘Is this the fitting progeny for a noble house?—one frail, half-helpless, softer than a woman; and Raymond——’

The lady was startled from her musings by a peal of thunder, so loud, that the long room seemed to echo with it, followed by flashes of lightning which dispelled the gloom, almost like that of night, by which the sky had been overcast. Again and again the thunder crashed, rain came down in torrents; and the Baroness, now that her attention was forcibly drawn to the scene without, remembered, apprehensively, that her sons had not yet returned from hunting, and that her daughter was also abroad. Raymond, indeed, might be trusted to weather a thunderstorm without fear; but Louis—Louis to whom a chill at any time might be almost death, and who had once been thrown into actual fits by his horror of lightning. Agnes, too, would be drenched and frightened, and it might be hurt, poor child!

The Baroness rose from her seat, and passed into the next room, where her tire-women sat spinning and sewing, to ask questions, the answers to which she could have recited beforehand. Had nothing been yet heard of the young Baron’s return? Was it known certainly that his brother had accompanied him? and where was Lady Agnes? The latter question was answered by the almost immediate entrance of a girl of seventeen, comely and

slender, and short rather than tall—on the whole not unlike her mother at the same age, except for an expression of more softness, and a few shades less of brightness in colouring. She paused near the threshold with a reverent salutation ; but when her mother held out her hands and called to her, she ran up and clung to her with the caressing confidence of a favourite child, and said rather plaintively :

‘The storm has forced me back, mother : and my new kirtle is spoiled.’

‘I rejoice to see thee safe in shelter,’ said her mother ; ‘but it is Louis for whom I feared. In such a tempest what may not befall him ?’

Agnès looked frightened, but could only answer by repeated assurances of her brother's speedy return unharmed—assurances which could not quiet the fears of her mother, as she waited for more than two hours, watching the course of one of the most terrific storms she could ever remember to have witnessed. She kept her daughter beside her ; but Agnes soon became too much alarmed herself by the violence of the thunder, and her perception of her mother's uneasiness, to renew her attempts at consolation.

The Baroness paced the chamber with noiseless foot-fall, listening with growing anxiety to the howling of the wind, as it swept among the trees ; to the rolling of the heavy thunder ; and the ceaseless dashing of the rain, which was rapidly changing the valley below, into what seemed like a sheet of water. Years, and perhaps the pressure of anxiety, had robbed her of much of the light-hearted courage in which she had prided as a girl ; and solicitude for Louis had so long been one of the chief habits of her mind, that every lightning flash now seemed to her as though it might carry his death-blow.

At length Agnes, with an exclamation of pleasure, pointed to an approaching group which was hurrying at full speed towards the castle ; the horses, though already spent by the labour of the day, now needing no spur to urge them along the path that led to shelter. The Baroness quitted the chamber in haste, that she might

meet her sons upon their entrance, and Agnes followed her in some doubt and fear. Had she seen Louis riding among the rest? And what was that which one of the party seemed to hold before him upon his horse? A tall young cavalier stood laughing in the hall by the time the lady reached it; and, in answer to her anxious questions, he pointed with another laugh towards two men who were just entering, bearing some burden between them.

'We have brought home to you a doughty huntsman, my lady mother,' he said, at the same time making her a bow, which had, at least, as much of mockery as of respect in it, 'fainting with terror at a thunder-clap. Where is his nurse, that she may comfort him, and give him new courage?'

His mother was not looking at him, scarcely heeding him indeed, as she watched them carry in the senseless body of her younger son, and lay it down upon an oaken settle. A slight, ungainly, and even mis-shapen form was that which lay so helplessly before her, with limp, nerveless arms hanging heavily from its side; and the face was of such a deadly whiteness when contrasted with the wet, heavy masses of dark hair which fell around it, that the mother, as she bent over the youth, fully believed for several moments that he had met his death by a lightning stroke. Raymond's voice again broke in upon the breathless pause:

'Now that you have him once more in your care, madam, I would counsel you to keep him safe, and not suffer him again to ride with huntsmen. No, no, it is not puling boys who should keep such company. He to sit upon a noble horse among a gallant train! Set up an ape to ride beside me sooner. Give him a fool's cap and bells to play with, that might suit with his deformed body and limping gait, no less than with his sharp wit and peevish humour.'

His mother, roused to attention by the loud, harsh tones and grating laugh, looked towards him now, and said, with a flash of indignation crossing her pale face:

'Peace, thou ungentle boy. Is this a time for such reckless gibes when thy only brother lies slain within the hour?'

‘Slain, said you?’ returned the young man, again with a slight laugh of that most unpleasant tone, which seems to speak more of contempt than merriment; ‘never fear for that, my gentle mother. It is naught but a fit, a fit of fright, which overthrew my valiant brother from the moment that the thunder began to grumble. By our lady, but he was alive enough when we lifted him on horse-back, and great pain we had to hinder his kicks and struggles, lest the horse should throw both rider and burden. Trust me, he will begin to stir his limbs presently. Said I not so?’ for the hitherto motionless body now began to show signs of life.

The Baroness, now satisfied that her son had suffered no mortal injury, but was really stricken by one of those fits which had once or twice before assailed him, began to concern herself with all the means her experience suggested for his recovery; till at the end of about half an hour she had the pleasure of seeing him restored. He lay then conscious, but pale and exhausted, and with a fretful, pained expression, which showed his mother that his suffering was not yet entirely removed.

Raymond stood at some distance, leaning against the wall, while he watched them in silence. He was a fair, handsome young man, of five-and-twenty, and in spite of some heaviness of expression, his general aspect was not otherwise than pleasing; while in his straight, well-formed limbs and ruddy countenance there appeared an amount of vigour which might have seemed enough to supply his brother’s feeble frame, and yet leave plenty to spare. Many parents might have looked with pride upon such a son, but it was never proudly that Claudine’s eyes looked towards him, but rather with a kind of yearning disappointment. In outward aspect he was the most like his father of all the children, but she often told herself bitterly that he resembled him at heart less than any.

Raymond de Drumont was never to be seen negligently, or even simply, dressed, for all points of outward magnificence assumed great consequence in his mind, and now the drenched and spattered hunting suit he wore was profuse in all the elegance, which the foppery of the time

could suggest. The effect produced was all the more deplorable; and Agnes, as she stood by her mother, watching Louis gradually revive under her care, cast more than one shy glance of amusement at the forlorn condition of her brother's braveries, as though not sorry to see him discomfited, though she would not have ventured to laugh at it openly. Raymond, however, made no movement to leave the place where he was standing, or to change his soaked garments; he had merely shaken himself roughly, like a dog on leaving the water, and flung his gay cap in a tarnished heap at his feet; and at last, after shivering twice or thrice, cursing the cold between his teeth, he called for a cup of wine, which was brought to him in a huge beaker, such as the attendant rightly thought best fitted to suit the taste of his young master. As Raymond stood drinking deep draughts of the fiery wine, he saw his brother's eyes open to full sense, and turned upon himself, and began to talk to him in rather a taunting tone.

'I am rejoiced to see thee once more restored, my most valiant brother,' he said with a sneer, 'and drink to thy better courage. See, the lightnings are flashing yet! but never fear them now, man; the mother's arms are round thee now, and she will hide thy tears in her bosom, if thou art minded to weep as thou didst two hours since.'

Louis, who had begun to throw himself about restlessly on his hard couch, while rejecting with querulous impatience his mother's gentle consolations, now turned upon his brother with more passion than could have been looked for from one in his feeble state.

'You say things that are false, brother,' he panted. 'Why have you drawn me forth to go with you, that you might make your sport of me as you have done this day? Were I but tall and strong as you are, you should not scorn me so.'

Raymond tossed off the last draught of wine, and called for more, only answering his brother by a laugh, which seemed to excite his nervous susceptibility as strongly as words could have done. Louis was too much exhausted to speak again, but he lay panting with excite-

ment, and darting glances of powerless anger towards Raymond, who still stood looking down upon him with the same scornful smile.

‘Raymond, Raymond,’ said the anxious mother, oppressed as she always was by the frequent jangling between her sons, ‘how long wilt thou harass us by these heartless taunts upon thy brother’s feebleness? Come with me, Louis; come away, my poor boy, and let us lay thee in thy bed to sleep away all trouble. Thou must never leave me again, Louis, for a day’s hunting; it is too hard for thee.’

‘I did but go because Raymond scoffed at me, and called me faint-hearted, that I would never share in any manful pastime,’ said Louis, making an effort to rise; but he had not regained sufficient strength, and fell back helplessly, with an impatient exclamation.

His mother was alarmed to see how pale he was; and to notice the shuddering fits, which seemed to pass through his whole frame. At this moment Raymond stepped forward, and, thrusting into his brother’s hand the half-empty flagon from which he had been drinking, said, in a rather more good-humoured tone than he had yet employed:

‘Come, drink, man; this is what shall put new heart into thee, and warm the blood in thy veins.’

Louis tried at first to push away the hand with a pettish movement, and turned his face from his brother like an angry child; but, as Raymond persisted in forcing the draught upon him, he yielded, drinking eagerly, and the wine gave him strength enough for the time to stand upright, and to leave the hall with only the help of his mother’s support.

As he walked, it was plainly to be seen that he limped almost painfully, and though he could scarcely be called actually deformed, there was much in the aged and suffering expression of the face, no less than in the stunted growth and awkward, painful gait, which seemed to bear the stamp of some such blighting influence. In disposition, too, the young man often showed some signs of the unhappy temper, which is often ascribed to deformed

persons—something of its peevishness, its melancholy, and even its malice, seemed to cling to him, in spite of the restraint of a naturally generous and warm-hearted nature.

The Baroness, sadly as her patience was sometimes tried by her wayward boy, had not failed to see in him the germs of nobler qualities, than had ever yet shown themselves in his brother. They might be stunted and feeble, as well as his half-crippled frame, but they were surely there, the mother thought, anxious to find all hopeful signs in either of her sons. She had seen Louis carried away from all sense of himself and his feebleness, and his eyes kindled and glowing with high aspirations, to which Raymond remained as cold and unresponsive as the dog that crouched at his feet; and she told herself that it was but the luckless fate by which all generous aims and lofty ambitions were made impossible for him, that had soured her Louis.

Louis was at this time twenty-three years of age, but his height did not exceed that of a boy of fifteen. His mother, though not at all above the common height of women, was considerably the taller as they walked now side by side—a difference which was further increased by the forward stoop, like that of an old man, with which the youth carried his body. In features he bore no likeness to either parent; and the outline of his countenance was in itself somewhat unpleasing, even without the marks of ill-health, which had robbed it of all youthful freshness.

The future fortune of this son was necessarily a source of considerable anxiety to his parents; the more so, as his shrinking repugnance to the retirement of the cloister appeared almost invincible. There were, indeed, many other obstacles to this refuge, and even had there not been, his mother, in her careful solicitude, would scarcely have borne that he should be taken from her charge, and consigned to the probable privations and hardships of such a life.

The Baroness watched by the side of her son until he slept. Then, leaving the chamber for a short time, she

went to attend to some affairs, which pressed upon her notice, and presently returned where Raymond, seated at the huge oak table, was by this time appeasing his keen-edged appetite with a hunter's meal. As his mother entered, he turned towards her and half rose, but again seating himself, said :

'There was somewhat of which I had purposed to speak to you, madam, had not that puling boy driven that and all else out of my head. I have heard a thing which, if it be true, as I doubt not, may bear some interest for you, as well as for all the realm. It is noised about that the old Queen is dead.'

The Baroness started slightly at this sudden communication, and looked at her son a little perplexed to understand how the event was to affect her personally, as he had hinted.

'So now all say,' continued the young man carelessly, 'that the King must return, and will presently sail for home ; and if my father——'

His mother heard the explanation no further ; there was no room in her mind for anything but a sudden thrill of unexpected joy. The King was about to return, now Bertram would come home.

Leaving Raymond still busily employed over his trencher, she stole softly back into the chamber where Louis lay asleep, and stood by the window, looking out. Within the last hour the storm had ceased, and now the sun was shining. Her eyes just caught the fast-fading colours of the rainbow before it vanished. It was an eastern window, and the trees beyond were all gilded in the light of the sinking sun. In the branches some little birds were chirping, while they shook the drops from their wings and smoothed and preened their feathers, having got over their fright at the great disturbance, which had perhaps meant to them little less than the end of the world. They were chattering together, probably, of the terror and distress they had been in, and telling how they had never been more surprised in their little lives than when the thunder growled so fearfully, and the lightning flashed in among the boughs ; except when

the sun came back at the end of it all to comfort them with his cheery laugh again. The raindrops everywhere were glowing so brightly, that the clouds might have been raining fire instead of water ; unless the lightning had got into them, and so had come down upon the ground and stayed there.

That was all she saw and heard, for the view from that window was not a wide one ; but her thoughts travelled far beyond, to the shores of Palestine, where there should soon be a great army gathered together, ready to fill the ships which lay waiting, and Bertram would be there. And after that, every day and every hour, as it slipped by, would bring him nearer home. It was long before she remembered how easily it might be that those ships should return without him ; and then she turned away from the thought, and would not harbour it for a moment. Bertram was coming home ! She would look at nothing but that, and Bertram's presence always meant to his wife freedom from all heavy cares, responsibilities, or fears ; and such a delicious sense of rest in his goodness and his strength, as was like a foretaste of heaven itself. The long and frequent partings from her husband, to which she had been compelled to submit, had been, indeed, among the chief trials of her married life. She felt herself unequal, too, to much of the charge that fell upon her in his absence, and especially did it seem to her difficult, and almost impossible, to guide or control the wayward dispositions of her sons. Raymond usually made slight account either of his mother's wishes or commands ; and had grown of late to address her often with such scant respect, that her wounded pride more than once found its relief in secret tears. Louis, though he was necessarily more under her influence, and displayed more marks of filial affection, had yet many fits of petulance or stubbornness, which she was quite unable to melt ; while frequent discord between the brothers, who seemed to have little mutual sympathy, tried her spirit not a little.

These things, as well as all else, the Baroness thought, would all be right when her husband had returned ; and she began to try to calculate how long a time must pass

before she could begin to look for his arrival. There must be a long period of waiting, she knew ; but it was like a shock to her when she turned from the pleasant visions which had filled her fancy at first, to count the months during which she must sit in patience. At that moment the time which intervened seemed almost as long, and quite as much a trial, as the years that had gone before.

With an impatient sigh, the Baroness turned away from the window, and took her place again by Louis's side, drawn thither by the sound of the heavy and distressed breathing with which he had awakened from his sleep.

CHAPTER XL.

THE following morning found Louis in so dangerous a state that his mother had no thought to spare for anything but nursing him ; and she spent the day completely beside him, for though, to her grief and alarm he did not know her, her presence seemed nevertheless to have a soothing effect. Indeed, if she only left for a few minutes, her post beside his bed, that she might refresh herself by a glance from the window, or make some little arrangements, which were necessary for the comfort of her patient, his feverishness and restlessness increased so much, that she was obliged to return immediately to quiet his impatient cry.

After some time Agnes crept in to share her watch, and they sat there side by side until noon was long past. At length one of her women came to inform the Baroness that the young Count Maurice de Croissy was in waiting below, and craved an interview with the Lady Agnes. Agnes started, and coloured nervously, at the announcement ; and, springing to her feet, began to arrange her disordered ringlets with hurried fingers, till, meeting her mother's gaze, which was fixed upon her very anxiously, she faltered and drew back, and asked her mother in timid, appealing tones whether she would not accompany her.

The Baroness felt distressed by the double claim ; should she go with her daughter, or stay with her son ? No, there could be no question, to leave Louis in that moment was impossible to her, and however reluctant she was to send Agnes to this meeting without her, she felt that she had no choice. Turning, therefore, to the attendant, she desired her to go with her daughter, and remain with her during the interview ; and as Agnes still hung back, begging to be allowed to remain, and not to receive the Count at all that day, the Baroness gently insisted that she should leave her ; and the docile girl prepared to obey without further words, though still reluctantly. Her mother watched her sadly, and before she quitted the room drew her into her arms and kissed her fondly.

‘Go, my child,’ she said, as she released her ; ‘thy father would be ill pleased to have the Count dismissed in so hasty a fashion, and that thou shouldst be denied to him. Silly child, why shouldst thou fear him ? Go with Jeanneton, and she will have thee in her care.’

The mind of the mother was almost equally divided between anxiety for her daughter and her son ; and she much regretted the arrival at such a time of this young cavalier, to whom Agnes had been betrothed by her father, shortly before his departure. Agnes, as her mother had seen with alarm and sorrow, had seemed of late to shrink with an unexplained distaste from the engagement which had been made for her ; never willingly receiving the visits of her betrothed, and showing when in his presence such a shrinking constraint as could not escape remark. Her mother had often pondered anxiously over these things ; and thought she had cause to fear that some other secret feelings lay at the root of this new and strange aversion to an arrangement, which had been made for her by a kind and careful father, and which seemed in every way a most happy and desirable one. The Baroness had been distressed also to find her eldest son manifesting a decided ill-will towards the young Count, whom she herself had learned to love with a cordial affection ; and many a hot dispute between these two had grieved her lately, and given her no little alarm for their consequences.

As she sat by Louis's bed, watching his feverish tossing, and trying to anticipate his wants or to soothe his incoherent complainings, the mother's thoughts wandered unceasingly to her other child. Anxiety for Agnes, the darling docile daughter who had never cost her a single care through all the years of childhood, was comparatively new to her, and her mind—already a little unnerved, by uneasiness on Louis's account—persisted in picturing, with a teasing iteration, all the untoward things which might be done, or said, in that interview to which Agnes, contrary to custom, had been obliged to go alone. At length her desire to know what was passing between them became quite irresistible; and seeing that Louis had fallen at length into a fevered sleep, she hastily left the chamber, and went in search of her daughter.

Certainly, both the girl and her young lover looked somewhat forlorn at the moment of her entrance, and both turned with an expression of unmistakable relief, as they saw the Baroness approaching towards them. The young Count had been leaning, with rather a moody face, in the recess of a window at one end of the room; while Agnes stood silent before a table at some yards' distance, her hands nervously locked together, and eyes looking nearly ready for tears. The elderly woman who had attended the young lady, stood grave and motionless a few inches beyond the threshold, looking not towards either of the two, but with her eyes fixed straight before her upon the opposite wall.

The Baroness had seen the cloud upon the young man's countenance, and received him, as he stepped forward to kiss her hand, with one of her kindest smiles of welcome, and laying a motherly hand upon his arm, spoke a few gentle words which brought an answering smile to the ruddy lips.

'Come hither, Agnes,' she said, as she seated herself and drew her daughter to her side. 'My dear lord, how long a time it is that we have not seen you. I had thought you had purposed an earlier return.'

'When a man sets out upon a distant journey, madam,' replied the Count, 'he knows not well himself when he

may return, or whether he shall ever return in life ; and in truth, as it seems to me, Lady Agnes would have worn as pleased a countenance had I passed from her sight for ever.' And he cast a glance, half of fondness, half of petulant reproach, towards the listless figure of the girl.

'Indeed, indeed, you do me wrong !' cried Agnes, for the first time lifting her eyes ; but before the firm searching look she met from her lover, they fell again immediately.

'You are too harsh a judge,' said the Baroness, 'of a maiden's bashfulness. My Agnes could harbour no such ungentle thoughts, and you know well that her will to you is kind.'

'You know, my lord, it is as my mother says, that I wish you nought but well,' faltered Agnes, seeing that he looked to her.

'Thou dost wish me nought but well,' retorted he, still in a tone of reproach ; 'and what is that to tell me ? Had it been my part to welcome thee after tedious absence, should I have met thee with cold and distant looks, and given no warmer assurance of my faith than that I wished thee nought but well ?'

'Of a verity, my young lord, you sue for ladies' favours in most lordly fashion,' said the Baroness, half-smiling, though at the same time a little inclined to take offence at the young man's impetuosity. 'Would it be fitting, think you, that my daughter should use such scant reserve as a young hot-brained cavalier may show ? You would take her kindness as not of grace, but of right.'

The young Count looked quite abashed at these few words, and glanced anxiously towards Agnes as though to learn whether he had erred in being too vehement, and had really offended her by the presumption of his language ; but she, whose unfailing gentleness would have been slow to take offence at any time, felt only sorry that she should have hurt him, and, finding words fail her, silently offered him her hand. He kissed it, more grateful for the slight voluntary favour than he could have been for any extorted by urgency, and turned a brighter face towards the Baroness, as she said :

‘You find us full of care to-day for my poor Louis, who lies very sick. I knew not how to snatch a moment in which to leave his bed that I might speak with you, and even now I fear me that I ought not.’

Maurice de Croissy had no great regard for Louis ; but the weary voice and saddened looks of the mother—a lady whom he cordially loved and revered—touched him nevertheless, and it was in his gravest and kindest tones that he now replied :

‘Let us trust in the mercy of Heaven, madam, that he may be restored to you again as often before.’

The Baroness, having the remembrance of her suffering son brought more vividly before her at this moment, half rose as though to leave the room in her anxiety to return to him ; but the look of unspoken entreaty which Agnes turned towards her, and still more the fear that Raymond might return, and that there might take place between the young men one of those angry scenes, which she had learned to dread every time that chance threw them together, induced her to remain. She was silent for several moments, however, as she sat leaning her head upon her hand, and in the meantime the Count was attempting to converse with Agnes ; but she had already returned to her former listless manner, and seemed to draw back half-frightened, as though she thought she had shown him too much favour. He could scarcely win an answer from her to anything he might say ; and his face again became downcast as he turned away and began slowly to walk up and down the room. The Baroness soon perceived that things were not going so easily as she would have them ; and, used as she had been to put aside her own feelings or anxieties where her children were in question, made an effort to rouse herself from her troubled reverie.

‘I trust, my lord,’ she said, ‘that your union with this dear child may not now be delayed so long as I had feared. You will remember well, I cannot doubt, the promise of my husband that it should take place immediately upon his return. From the events which have passed of late in the kingdom, I have taken leave to hope

that the return of my dear lord may now be looked for shortly.'

'I have hoped it also, madam,' replied the young man, turning towards her a face sparkling with pleasure, and then glancing at Agnes to see whether her feelings were in sympathy with his own.

The Baroness also looked, and with some uneasiness, towards her daughter, and read that in her face which increased her uneasiness tenfold. Agnes had turned her head aside that she might not fully meet her lover's inquiring look, and her cheeks grown perceptibly paler, together with the helpless expression, half of sadness, half terror, in her eyes, smote her mother with a pang like acute pain. She hoped only that the young Count had not read what she had read; he did not look with a mother's eyes, and the demeanour which spoke to her of suppressed suffering might have seemed only girlish embarrassment to him; but the lover had seen that the look upon Agnes's face was one of distress at a thought which should, he told himself, have been a source of exceeding pleasure to her as to himself. After a long and very uncomfortable pause, during which he was struggling against his sense of disappointment, he turned to her again, and spoke gravely and gently:

'Dear lady, I trust you have no fear of me. If you would not have our marriage made so hastily; and yet,' he murmured, with a little touch of bitterness, 'it is no such great haste neither; yet if the day come too swift for you, I pray you tell me so, that I may add my own voice to yours in praying your noble father to postpone it. Believe me, I would not urge you ungently; even though it grieve me, I would wait your pleasure.'

Agnes struggled to answer him, but could not. The kindness of his tone, in which she had failed to feel the little under-current of injured feeling, was too much for her, and, to her mother's farther distress and vexation, she hid her face in her hands in a sudden passion of tears.

It was at this instant, when both were watching Agnes in anxious perplexity, and she was struggling in vain to

repress the outbreak, in which the pent-up feelings of the last hour found expression, that a loud imperative voice was heard without, and the mother's heart sank still lower as she heard Raymond's heavy step approaching the door. Agnes raised her head, and, hastily drying her eyes, assumed as composed a bearing as she could in so short a time ; while the Count de Croissy drew himself up rather haughtily, as though prepared to resent any slighting treatment, or undue assumption, on the part of the young heir.

Raymond entered with a slightly heated expression. His temper, not of the most patient at any time, had been thrown off its balance by some negligence, real or supposed, in the treatment of his favourite horse, and he had not yet quite worked off his passion. He had been told of the arrival of the Count at the castle ; and holding well in his memory the circumstances of their last meeting, which had been, as usually happened, an angry one, came into his presence with a very strong inclination to quarrel with him. Maurice de Croissy, if he felt anything of the same desire, upon meeting the scowling and contemptuous glance, which Raymond threw upon him when he had sauntered into the room, and spoken a few careless words to his mother, at least held his temper under better control, and showed no outward tokens of anger. On the contrary he bowed gravely, and advanced to offer his hand with an air of no little formality.

‘I am happy to meet you, Sir Raymond,’ he said in a corresponding tone of cold stateliness ; ‘it is long since we last parted.’

He perhaps intended this remark as a hint that all disagreement, which had formerly arisen between them, might now prudently be forgotten ; but Raymond, with a rude laugh, contemptuously passed over the extended hand.

‘The time is so long, Sir Count,’ he said, ‘that it would seem your memory is already confused as to the manner of our parting. Our leave-taking was not so affectionate, methinks, that our greeting need be more so.’

‘I would have met you in courtesy, as gentlemen are wont,’ replied the Count warmly, while he coloured high.

‘For our parting, I remember it as well as you do; it was when you acted like an unnatural clown, and I, myself, like——’

‘Like a paladin,’ sneered Raymond. ‘Come, never leave a word half spoken, man.’

‘Like a fool,’ returned the other bitterly; and turning on his heel he strode towards the window, where he stood for the next few moments, gnawing his lip, and striving to devour the rage that possessed him.

The Baroness here addressed a serious remonstrance to her son, but to all appearance he did not heed her, as he stood leaning his hands upon the table, and watching his antagonist, with a malicious pleasure, in the knowledge that he had stung and wounded him.

‘Come, Maurice,’ he said at length, ‘if your choler is yet too hot for you, in the courtyard there is cooler air.’

The young Count turned round, his cheeks still flaming with anger; he drew some comfort from the thought that he had a moment before heard Agnes say with generous indignation :

‘Brother, you dishonour yourself, and you dishonour me, yet more than the noble Count.’

Already vexed, disappointed, and ill at ease from the result of his interview with Agnes, Maurice de Croissy felt that he was unequal just then to enduring with coolness any further insolence from her brother; with whom he would have been sorry to come to a violent quarrel if it were possible to avoid it.

‘I think, Sir Raymond,’ he said, as calmly as he could, ‘that the air of this castle is nowhere so cool as I could wish to breathe to-day. My dear and honoured lady,’ he continued earnestly, walking towards the spot where the Baroness stood, with a pained flush upon her thin cheek, ‘suffer me now to take my leave. I trust that you will not hold me to blame for the angry words which have grieved you. Believe me I would undergo much to spare you pain.’

‘I cannot blame you, dear son,’ she replied, as she held his hand kindly, with an indignant feeling at the reception he had met with from both her children; ‘I do but

blame the overbearing spirit of a young man, who can find room in his heart neither for the courtesy of a gentleman, nor for the duty of a son. But you have travelled far to visit us, and it grows late. Will you leave us without rest, without even breaking bread beneath this roof ?

‘Indeed, madam, it is better,’ he replied ; ‘the Lady Agnes, too, must see that it is better.’

‘I do see it,’ said Agnes, looking up now frankly as he approached her, ‘and I grieve to see it. Maurice, I grieve that my brother should use you thus unworthily.’

The young lover turned to go with a somewhat lighter heart. She had called him Maurice, and parted from him more warmly than they had met. It was her maidenly bashfulness after all that had made him deem her cold. Her regard for him was deeper than he was sometimes tempted to think it. Surely, if this were so, he could afford to despise the insults of Raymond, who had been of a savage nature from his cradle ; nay, he did, he had always despised him. Indeed, considering how deep was the contempt, with which the Count regarded Raymond de Drumont, it was strange that he retained the power of moving him to anger so easily.

‘Stay,’ said Raymond, as the Count was moving towards the door ; ‘if you have finished your leave-takings with my mother and sister, I have somewhat to say to you myself.’

‘Has there not been enough said between you and me, Sir Raymond ?’ asked De Croissy, gravely.

‘Why, no,’ replied the other in a slightly more conciliatory tone, for his ill-humour had by this time a little abated. ‘Come with me a little further, so, for I would not have my mother hear us.’

The Count followed him in some perplexity, wondering what might be the meaning of this change of tone, yet willing, since Raymond’s manner now seemed to show some surly disposition towards civility, to hear what he had to say. But Raymond had for some time past been preparing a drop of poison to pour into the ear of his companion, and the present opportunity was too good a one to be thrown away for the sake of a gratification no more novel than the indulgence of his own ill-humour.

'You hold it for truth, I think, Sir Count,' he said, 'that I bear no great love towards you, and by my faith you deem rightly, though I doubt not yours for me might be weighed in an equal balance. You call me clown, ungentle, and unnurtured, because my lips have never belied my heart, and you hold me for your enemy. But, my lord,' with a slow and meaning intonation, 'the enemy whom we should all dread the most, is he who masks his purposes under a fair show of smiles and courteous speeches, and who mingles slow poison in the cup from which he bids you pledge him.'

Maurice de Croissy threw a suspicious glance upon him, and demanded shortly what he meant.

'Since you will have plain words,' returned Raymond, 'it is of my sister that I would speak. She meets you, does she not, with soft smiles, pretty speeches and languishing looks? Well, all women have store of these things. Had you thought that she would keep them for you alone? Nay, but I could tell you a different tale.'

'Had you thought, Sir Raymond, that I would stand quiet here to listen to such hints and evil suggestions? You would slander your sister.'

'You may take it ill or well,' replied Raymond, with a smile of malicious pleasure, 'yet I could tell, if you list to hear, of a fine young gallant, on whom my sister sheds her smiles.'

'I will hear no further,' interrupted the Count abruptly; and, turning from his companion, he soon left the castle with more haste than ceremony.

'What didst thou say to him?' asked the Baroness with a penetrating look at her son.

He laughed.

'A caution, my mother, a friendly caution, nothing more. I did but warn him of a snare which had been spread by craft for his feet.'

His mother glanced at him doubtfully, but her desire to return to the sick bed of her son, from whom she felt she had been absent too long, prevented her from speaking more at length.

Maurice de Croissy, in the meantime, hurried away from

the castle in a turmoil of excited feeling, which he made no attempt for some time to reduce to order. However he might affect to receive Raymond's plain and insulting hints with contemptuous indignation, they touched him more nearly than he would have been ready to confess. It was not till he had left the castle far behind him that he began to regain any control over his thoughts, or to look upon what had passed, a little more in the light of reason. Certainly the manner of Agnes had in the first place disappointed him; but, as he now told himself, that was the only circumstance which ought to dwell upon his mind for an instant. If she were strange and cold with him, that was all. Surely he knew Raymond de Drumont too thoroughly to put any trust in words that came from him. No, he would trust in Agnes, he would trust in her mother; it would be a sin to dream even of doubting either.

Louis seemed so much worse when his mother came to him again, so restless, wandering, and fretful, while a burning fever, alternated by fits of aguish shivering, seemed to possess his frame, that she was still more seriously alarmed than she had been before on his account. Kneeling beside him, while she tried every possible means to relieve his distress, she blamed herself for having left him but for one half-hour, as though her simple presence were enough to shield him from the sure creeping on of deadly sickness. Her heart and hands were now so full of Louis, that for several hours she had no attention to spare for her daughter; and almost lost sight for a while of the interview in which she had just borne a part, though at any other time it would have caused her much uneasiness. Agnes had again followed to the sick chamber, it was as though she did not like to leave her mother's side, and now sat droopingly in a corner apart. Once or twice when the Baroness was sadly tired with holding Louis's head in her arms, she would have assisted her, but Louis would have no one to nurse him but his mother; and at his impatient rejection of her, Agnes shrank away again.

At length the Baroness was relieved from her difficult

task, for a period of quietness which was almost stupor, succeeded to the restless fever ; and seeing, or fancying, his condition materially improved, she felt able to rest for a little while, after the strain which had been put upon her strength, and her faculties, for so long a time.

CHAPTER XLI.

FOR some time after the fatigues of her incessant attendance upon Louis were suspended, the Baroness leaned back wearily, with closed eyes and passive hands folded upon her lap, as she enjoyed the full relief of rest ; but at the end of half an hour, noticing the dejected figure of her daughter among the distant shadows, she called to her gently, and, drawing her close to her side, took both her hands in a lingering clasp, while she looked into her face long and searchingly. Agnes blushed more and more deeply, and turned her head away, as though almost frightened by the intentness of her mother's gaze, loving though it was.

'Dear child,' said the Baroness in a soothing tone, 'thou art less than happy of late. Let me know the cause whether of grief or sickness.'

Agnes murmured hastily that nothing ailed her—she was happy, quite happy, how could she be otherwise ? There was nothing in her life that could work her any grief ; and then, hiding her face in her mother's lap, began to cry distressfully.

'Dost thou think it so easy a thing to deceive me, Agnes ?' asked her mother sadly. 'Have I not noted what I now say, these many days, in thy flagging step and clouded eyes ? I see thee losing more and more of heart and brightness, and wouldst thou have me deem that it is without cause ?'

'No, I would not deceive you, my mother,' replied Agnes, still sobbing, 'and it is, indeed, true that I have been sad of late ; but what will it avail to speak to you of my heaviness ?'

‘It is my happiness,’ said the Baroness gravely, ‘to take part in the sorrows of my children. Tell me all this trouble, as thou hast ever done before. What,’ she continued, with a smile which had much of melancholy, as she raised the flushed and tear-stained face from her knee, ‘have the mother’s lips lost all their power of kissing tears away?’

‘I would tell you all, indeed, I would tell you, dear mother,’ said the girl, looking up eagerly, ‘and yet I know not well if I dare; I have so feared that you might be angry with me.’

‘Have I been so harsh a parent, child,’ returned her mother with a little reproach, ‘that thou canst fear me thus? Agnes, my darling, my favourite child, it is not possible that I could be harsh. Come, if this be, indeed, so hard a matter, I will aid thee to speak it; the husband, to whom thy father has promised thee, has become displeasing to thy mind?’

The tell-tale look upon the girl’s face, as she turned it swiftly away, made the few murmured words of assent scarcely necessary; and her mother went on to question her with the same patience and gentleness.

‘Tell me, my daughter, how it is that your mind has changed towards him. He is true, and brave, and gentle, if I read him well; and but a year since he was well-pleasing to thee, or so I thought.’

‘Yes, it is true, all that you have said is true, and yet, oh, madam,’ cried the girl, seizing her mother’s hand in sudden appeal, ‘I would not have him for a husband.’

‘And why?’ pursued the Baroness, ‘I fear me that there is more yet to be told.’

‘It is because—because, I know not how to say it,’ stammered Agnes; and as she spoke she blushed so deeply, and appeared so much confused, that her mother, watching her, was confirmed in a suspicion she had already formed.

‘Agnes,’ she said seriously, ‘thy words and looks give room to fear that thy mind has been drawn away from thine affianced husband by the words of some other, which have sounded more fairly, or by a bearing which has seemed to thee more gallant. Speak truth, child, if this is so, and fear not to anger me.’

'It is so, mother,' whispered Agnes; and she might, perhaps, have spoken further, had not her mother's attention been claimed at that moment by Louis, who was beginning again to stir uneasily and moan a little, and again needed her care.

The Baroness called to a woman who was in waiting without the chamber; and in directing and assisting her operations about the sick-bed, several minutes were passed. Then, when all that was necessary was done, she dismissed the attendant and turned again to her daughter.

'Now, Agnes,' she said, 'that I have learned the occasion of thy trouble, thou canst tell me, without fear or difficulty, all that is in thy heart concerning these things, and how and when all first arose. Had I known of this long before, my child, it might have been better, but tell it now.' And the Baroness, taking one of the girl's hands kindly, sat waiting, with no little anxiety, to hear her confession.

'It was in the last past winter,' said Agnes, 'when, as you will remember well, my brother's friend, Sir Henry Rochefort, tarried with us here for a season.'

'Sir Henry Rochefort, the young Englishman!' exclaimed her mother in extreme surprise; 'in truth, I had well-nigh forgot him altogether. Why, thou hast known him but for one short week.'

'It was for two weeks, dear madam, nay, more, nearly three, that he stayed among us,' answered Agnes, as though in eager justification; for though it was too dark to see her mother's face, she heard the slight ring of disapproval in her voice. 'It cannot be that you have already forgotten how it was with us through all that time of bitter frost, when he hunted with my brother; and then,' in lower and more faltering tones, 'he would often talk with me.'

The Baroness bit her lips, more deeply vexed than she cared to betray at that moment, and during the moment's pause that followed, reproached herself with having neglected to watch closely enough over the welfare of her young daughter.

'And what said he to thee,' she asked presently in a

quiet tone, 'that thou shouldst hold him so well in memory?'

'Indeed, indeed, dear mother,' said Agnes stammering, 'I scarce know what he said, but the thought of him has dwelt so in my mind from that time, that I could not cast it out; and though at times I joyed that I had seen him, yet always when the Count came, and would have had me welcome him kindly, and talk with him as I was wont to do, then I was wretched, for I felt as though I were wronging him. But, mother,' pursued the girl in an appealing tone, and seeming half-ready to cry again, 'I could not help it; it was no fault in me.'

'Thou hast been foolish, my daughter,' said the Baroness gently, as she put a caressing arm round her, 'foolish in allowing thine eyes to be dazzled thus by the glitter of a gay presence, and yet more foolish that thou hast wrapped the trouble close in thy breast, so long to canker there. Thou wouldst tell me, then, that nought has passed between thee and this young cavalier beyond what I know; that he has ever addressed thee with such regard as is due to a betrothed maiden, not seeking to beguile thee with vain gallantries?'

The murmured answer came almost too low for the mother's ears to catch:

'I did not say so, no; but he has said many things. He has told me that he takes me for his lady, as he is to be my knight. See, my mother,' and she pulled out of the bosom of her dress a golden ring, with a single pearl set in it, which she had worn round her neck upon a silken string, and held it up for her mother's examination.

The Baroness sat for some moments quite silent as she took the ring into her own hand, and looked at it intently. Could it be possible that her Agnes, whose heart she had believed to be so entirely in her own keeping, had acted in the way she had just described? For the moment the sense of deep disappointment, in her daughter, overpowered every other feeling, and she felt half heart-broken as the childish voice went on. The child had no due sense, her mother told herself bitterly, of what she had done in thus deceiving her mother, and wronging her lover; yes, and

departing from the rules of womanly discretion and dignity.

'I ever feared that you would blame me,' said Agnes, after a pause, as her mother did not speak; 'and so I said no word.'

Then came more loving, coaxing words, as that she could not help what had passed; that she had longed to tell of it; that it had often made her sad, and many other things; but, even through the dim light, the girl clearly saw something of the changed expression on her mother's face, faltered and stopped, half frightened by her long-continued silence.

'Agnes,' said the Baroness at length, 'I little thought to hear thee tell that thou hadst shamed thyself and me. This ring, then—this bauble—did he give it thee?' As she spoke she dropped it with contempt upon the floor; and as her daughter attempted no answer, went on: 'He knew, surely, of thy betrothal; or even if he had not learned it from some other, thou wouldst not have left him in ignorance of it? Speak, Agnes, and tell me whether he was unaware of it.'

Again there was a pause; but Agnes was crying now, and the only words her mother could obtain were:

'You have said that you would not be angry.'

'I am not angered; there, child,' said her mother, bending to kiss her brow; 'only tell me what I ask thee. Thou hast not kept this stranger knight in ignorance of the ties which bind thee to the Count de Croissy?'

'I did tell him of it, mother,' answered the girl, in a broken voice; 'but he had learned it before from my brother.'

'He is a recreant to his knighthood,' said the Baroness warmly. 'Worthless I ever thought him. Agnes, thou hast been the most precious to me of all my children, wake now at last from this evil dream; open thine eyes and see this man for what he is. Do not let thy thoughts cling so weakly about the memory of one who has never won, and will never win, any honourable fame.'

Agnes murmured faintly that her mother did not know him—he was far better than she thought.

‘Do I not?’ returned the Baroness, with some bitterness of tone; ‘nay, but I know him more truly than thou dost. I have seen him of myself as a braggart, and a drunkard; and I know that he is held for a craven and a faithless man. Dear daughter, if thou lovest me, cast the memory of him from thy mind like a soiled garment.’

‘He will expect,’ said Agnes, hesitating and stammering, ‘that I should keep true faith with him.’

‘Ah, child!’ replied her mother sadly; ‘if thou hadst thought more of the faith that was due to others, all this had never been. But what is it thou wouldst have? Dost think that if it had been his true purpose to seek thee in marriage, he would not have made suit for thy hand?’

‘He said that he would ask me of my father upon his return.’

‘He will not come,’ thought the mother, clinging at least to this comfort.

‘And what of Maurice,’ she said aloud; ‘hast thou then had no thought of him?’

‘Yes, oh, yes! I have thought of him often,’ replied the girl despairingly; ‘and it well nigh breaks my heart to talk with him, above all when he will speak such kind words. Oh, mother, I have been wretched; what is there that I can do?’

‘That I have already told thee,’ answered her mother gravely.

But it was not in her nature to see her darling distressed, without seeking in some way to soothe her trouble; and she gathered her daughter into her arms, and held her close during a pause of several moments, while lavishing upon her caresses and pet names, which were as refreshing to the spoiled girl, as dew to a half-withered plant. Agnes leaned her head upon her shoulder already half comforted. All the trials and perplexities, over which she had been puzzling so long, seemed wonderfully eased and lightened in a moment when her mother knew; but the disappointment and deep concern, which had fallen upon the Baroness, during this interview, could not pass away so soon.

'Agnes,' she said presently, 'rest assured of this one thing. Thy father will never consent to break the pledge he gave to the Count de Croissy, when he betrothed thee to him. If that be thy hope, dismiss it.'

'But he will come hither again—he will tell over to me, word by word, all that he has made me say to him, and I shall be shamed in his eyes,' said Agnes, with no little alarm mingling with the plaintive tones of her voice.

'He will not come,' replied the Baroness, striving to reassure her daughter by the same hope with which she consoled herself; 'trust me, thou wilt see him here no more. Forget him, child; it is not seemly that thy mind should be concerned for one of whom the world accounts so lightly. Do not answer me; but seek to banish these sick fancies by recalling the duty that is owing to thy parents, to the Count, thy affianced husband, and to thine own maiden dignity. Believe me, Agnes,' she pursued in sadder tones, as she kissed the doubting lips, 'all these things have already been forgotten too long. Go now, and to-morrow let me find my daughter again, such as I had always believed her. Now go to rest, my child.'

Left alone, the Baroness leaned her head upon her hand, in an attitude of utter weariness and dejection. She was, indeed, almost worn out by all the cares and labours of that trying day, and this last conversation with her daughter had saddened her more than all; for any disappointment from Agnes seemed harder to be borne than from the rest. Her care and affection had been freely spent upon her other children, but it was Agnes who had been her pride; her sons had for years been her chief sources of anxiety; and, though the elder daughter was good and dutiful, her mother had never been able to look upon her with quite the same admiring fondness she had given to her youngest child. There had seemed, indeed, to be some little failure of sympathy between Claudine and her mother, grounded on imperfect understanding, and she was plain and unattractive in appearance and manner; so that even in a mother's eyes she had been at a disadvantage by the side of her sister—pretty, graceful, and clingingly loving, as Agnes had always been.

But now, as the Baroness had listened to that tardy and hardly-extracted confidence, and heard Agnes relate the story of the strange infatuation, her love and pride in her were both hurt. She mused over it wonderingly and sadly for some time ; but before long Louis again claimed her attention, and she was obliged to turn from this and take up other cares.

Several days passed, during which Louis remained seriously, and even dangerously ill. His mother nursed him almost entirely herself, and seemed unwilling to allow an attendant to do the least service for him, unless when compelled by sheer fatigue to give up her charge for a time. Yet it was not that he was fretful and restless in her absence as at first, for he knew no difference now in those who sat by his bed.

During this time no word passed between Agnes and her mother on the subject of their late conversation ; both seemed to shrink from any reference to it, and the Baroness hoped that what she had said might dwell in her daughter's mind, and work its influence there silently.

Raymond went and came, with very little regard to any anxieties, which might hang over the rest of the household. Such sports as he was pleased with were followed with none the less ardour, and he drank in the evenings with some riotous companions none the less gaily, because his brother lay sick, and it might be dying, above. As he never asked for his brother, however, and scarcely saw his mother in these days, it may be that he was unaware of his state ; but, in any case, the Baroness was little surprised at his indifference, since he had never shown any real regard for Louis, but had seemed, on the contrary, to look upon him with dislike and contempt.

After a while the tide turned ; by slow degrees the violence of the sickness abated, and Louis was left a very feeble convalescent, on the bed where he had lain so long, too languid to rise, or even to talk much ; only able to mutter some sharp impatient word from time to time, or to turn his eyes with restless discontent from one object to another, about the small chamber. It was a very piti-

ful object that the mother feasted her eyes upon when first she felt able to tell herself with confidence that her son was recovering, yet it was more the air of listless apathy, or of fretful despondency, than any definite outer change, that made the difference. Louis could scarcely be paler than he had always been, and his limbs and features had long appeared wasted and shrunken ; but all the animation which had once seemed almost to transform his face if he were pleased or interested, seemed to have left it for ever now ; and indeed there were times when it was quite impossible to rouse him at all. In these apathetic moods, he had not even enough of energy to raise his hand to his head ; but would lie quite motionless, staring at the wall for hours at a time with weary eyes, and paying no heed to anything that was said and done, or who went and came about him. At such seasons even his mother could leave him without remark, and they were the only times in which she could take the needful rest ; for if he were in a different mood, he would not suffer her to quit his side, but if she only moved out of her sight for an instant, he would fret after her, like an abandoned infant, till her return. That wailing murmur, so pitiful to hear from the lips of a grown man, seemed to his mother, when first it struck upon her heart, like the echo of long-past days. It was as though she had her pining baby back again, and she nursed her afflicted son with the same caressing devotion as though he had been a sick infant.

Those who went about the sick chamber told each other, though they never hinted it to the Baroness, that Louis' mind had been so far weakened and over-clouded, that it had really been left as feeble as that of a young child, while his mother watched him with fast-growing alarm shadowing her first triumphant pleasure, lest, even now, she should see her son fade gradually away in that deadly lethargy. She knew too well the feebleness of his frame, to look to the future with much confidence ; and though he might have struggled through the immediate effects of the chill, and the shock he had received in that fatal thunder-storm, she had not failed to note before that

day that he was drooping sadly, and she had often had serious misgivings on his account.

Day after day went by, however, and Louis did not sink. After a little time his mother could even observe a certain, though gradual, improvement; he began to interest himself more in what passed around him, while growing obviously stronger both in mind and body. Soon, to her almost speechless delight, he was able to sit upright in his bed, and to talk with some gleam of his old spirit. Yet, even in the joy of her new hope, her own task was scarcely easier, for though the childish feebleness had in a great measure left him, the peevish and exacting temper seemed no less strong than before, and it often taxed all her powers to keep him in a tolerably contented and placid humour. Still Louis' fretful unreasoning fits were no new trial to his mother, and she was far too glad to see his energy returning to complain, even to herself, of the way in which he tried her patience. She must always be at hand to sing to him, or talk with him, when he was restless; and if she crossed his will in the least particular, or was not by his side at the very instant he wanted her, he would meet her with a long course of those querulous complainings, which from him had always the power of depressing her unspeakably. If his head ached he would have her lay her cool hand upon his forehead, and hold it there motionless for hours at a time; and often if the food offered him did not please his fancy, or if it were given by any other hand than hers, he would refuse it capriciously, and throw it upon the floor in a petulant passion. His fancies were so variable, that he would often reject impatiently what he had but a few moments before most eagerly desired.

The Baroness, who had indulged this son from his childhood with all the tender patience springing from her mother's pity for his afflicted state, bore with all his moods with the most utter gentleness, and at times almost unceasingly, for he now seldom slept. Occasionally, however, even in his most unreasonable fits, his impatience would suddenly give way; and he would seize his mother's hands, and cover them with kisses, protesting that she

looked as wan and feeble as a mournful ghost, and must leave him, to take some rest. Then she could leave him gladly, rejoicing that her poor boy had given her some token of affection.

The chief thing which comforted and supported the Baroness, among the many trials of her daily life at this time, was the thought of the probable return of her husband. She kept it always in her heart as a spring of secret delight; and prized it as some dweller in a hot and sandy desert might prize the memory of a running stream of fresh water, to which he constantly returns to quench his thirst. She had dwelt upon this idea till it had become like a positive certainty in her mind; and if day after day she reverted to it in her prayers, it was more in the spirit of thankfulness than of petition. She never felt so much joy in watching Louis' gradual progress, as when the frequent thought came that she would now have all her children safe to present to their father on his return; and it almost seemed as though she fancied that if she could keep Louis guarded from peril till that happy time arrived, no danger could have power to harm him afterwards.

Louis was not at all times in so capricious a humour; and when he was calmer, Agnes was sometimes permitted to take her mother's place in waiting on or amusing him, a task for which her gentle docile temper fitted her very well. The Baroness felt a peculiar pleasure in seeing these two thus happily engaged together, fondly wishing that Louis was oftener ready to accept his sister's attendance; for she well knew that this active and useful employment which forced her attention away from her own sick and brooding fancies, was likely to be of great benefit to Agnes. To her satisfaction the Count de Croissy had not again visited the castle, though she had found an opportunity of sending him some messages of kindly remembrance, which had been answered so cordially as to assure her that it was no hurt or offended feeling which kept him away. Meanwhile she watched her daughter, and told herself, hopefully, that improvement was apparent here also, and that she need not fear for her.

CHAPTER XLII.

'MOTHER,' said Louis one morning, when the Baroness was sitting by his side, enough at ease about him now to give a share of her attention to the piece of elaborate embroidery which she held in her hands ; 'how long am I to lie here like a log ? I will rise and try to walk.'

'Thou hast not the strength, I fear, dear son,' replied his mother soothingly. 'Wait yet a little longer.'

'Oh, I have strength enough for that, and more,' he answered impatiently ; 'only that you will ever seek to deny me what I wish. Sweet mother,' he pursued, taking her hand, and changing his tone to one of coaxing entreaty, 'you will not refuse me so trifling a thing. I would have Gilbert to array me, and walk about for a little space.'

'I will never deny thee save in such things as are hurtful, Louis,' said the Baroness. She had been much surprised, and even pleased, to hear the request, though thinking it unwise to yield to it ; it showed at least, that his mind was gaining in activity. Why, thou foolish boy, dost think thyself fit so much as to stand alone ? Remember the last time thou wouldst make the venture, and learn patience and prudence.'

She spoke with her sweetest smile, and laid a caressing hand upon his head ; but the smile failed to melt his stubborn humour, and he pushed the hand away.

'Patience,' he muttered fretfully ; 'and have I shown no patience ? Have I not lain here already till my limbs are as stiff as wooden crutches, and of less service ? Mother, you shall not cross me in this ; I have said that I will rise, and I will not be hindered. What ! will you use me as an infant for ever ? Stand aside, I pray you.'

The Baroness, who was perhaps a little over-cautious in her treatment of her son, watched him with some alarm, as he struggled for a few moments to rise ; but knowing that remonstrance would be useless, attempted none. He was more feeble than he knew, and was soon obliged to sink back again, tired with his fruitless efforts. After

giving vent to his vexation in a few petulant exclamations, he kept a sullen silence for some time ; and when at length he spoke again, it was to make a request which surprised his mother still more than the former one. He wished to see his brother, he said ; Raymond must come to him there.

In spite of the discord which too often reigned between the two, Louis had always felt a peculiar kind of attraction towards his elder brother, which his mother thought strange ; but it probably arose in part from his intense and natural admiration for all the attributes of physical vigour and activity, which had been denied to himself. Raymond too, though he never spared Louis' susceptible temper if he were in an ill humour, which was certainly very often the case, treated him with a kind of contemptuous protection in his more genial moods, and would even occasionally take a little trouble to gratify his wishes ; though in something of the same scornful spirit which might lead him to feed or pat his dog at one moment, that he might see the animal wag his tail ; and the next instant, in his capricious fury, kick or beat him without restraint. Louis' feelings towards his brother alternated between an almost absolute dependence, and a sense of rather spiteful resentment.

The Baroness did not like to deny her son so apparently simple a request, though she was more than doubtful whether she could persuade Raymond to visit the sick room ; or whether the interview would have any good effect if he consented. After a moment's hesitation, therefore, she went in search of her son herself, not choosing to send another with such a summons ; for she feared it might be met in some rough, if not brutal, manner ; and she had always tried, though with fruitless pains enough, to keep Raymond's savage outbreaks, and especially the frequent discord between the two brothers, as much as possible from the ears and knowledge of the household.

It chanced that Raymond was in an unusually good humour on this day, for several things had conspired together to please him. He received his mother

smilingly, and with a little more respect than was his wont; and since he was lounging idly with nothing for the present to do, he gave a tolerably gracious assent to his brother's desire; though it evidently surprised him not a little. The Baroness was so much encouraged by his apparently placid mood, that she ventured to entreat him to be kind and quiet in his manner towards Louis, who was ill-fitted to bear excitement; and even his careless promise, as he sauntered into the sick-room, gave her some feeling of assurance.

If Raymond's manner was intended to be kind, it was certainly not quiet.

'Why, what now, what now?' he commenced in a tone of boisterous raillery. 'I little thought to see thee still lying there, man, with a face the colour of new-drawn milk, and looking as grim and stark as a dead man. By this hand, but I had rather be dead, I think, than hide my head in a hole for months, as thou hast done! Did they not tell me but yesterday that thou wert well-nigh restored?'

'Thy brother's sickness hath been more deadly than thou knowest of, my son,' replied his mother gravely, 'and the mercy of Heaven has restored him as from the very gates of death.'

'Where they must have maltreated him sore,' said Raymond. 'Tell me, Louis, stands there a churlish porter at that gate, who robs and misuses wayfarers, that thou returnest thence in so pitiful a plight?' and he broke into a hoarse laugh at his own clumsy wit.

'In all the long days that I have lain here,' said Louis, looking up with a dissatisfied expression at the tall figure which leaned negligently over him, 'thou hast never been once to visit me.'

Raymond muttered rather churlishly, and in a tone almost too low to be heard, that he had other concerns than moping in a sick-chamber; but as Louis began to press him with questions about the hunting expeditions and other affairs in which he had been engaged lately, he sat down by the bed-side with tolerable good-humour, and proceeded to give a very full account of several recent

exploits of his own. He waxed so eloquent upon this theme that it held him for fully half an hour ; while his brother listened for the time with all the abandonment of genuine interest. Their mother looked at them both with astonishment. It was long since she had seen Louis look so animated ; but of all the assistants whom she might have called to aid her in entertaining him, Raymond would certainly have been the very last to occur to her mind.

‘ Ah ! brother, if we might but change places together,’ sighed Louis after some time ; ‘ that I might do all these things thou tellest of, and many more besides.’

‘ That would please thee more than it could me, I think,’ answered Raymond, with a broad smile.

It was a more kindly one than usual, and possibly the passing thought came to him at that moment that, considering the many things in which he had so greatly the advantage of this despised brother, he might have afforded to show him more kindness than he had been used to do. Most men have their moments of good feeling, and even Raymond had gentle thoughts sometimes.

‘ I can well believe that,’ replied Louis ; ‘ but had it fallen to me to possess thy vigour, Raymond, I know that I would put it to more account than thou dost.’

‘ Why, what wouldst thou do ?’ inquired Raymond curiously. ‘ Come, fancy thyself a giant, tall as Ascabart, and more puissant than Roland ; what should be thy mighty deeds ?’

‘ I would have gone to fight by my father’s side in Palestine,’ said Louis simply.

The elder brother turned from him with an exclamation of impatience, and met his mother’s eyes fixed on him with a peculiar expression. It had been intended from the first that he should himself have accompanied the Baron upon this crusade ; and nothing but the effects of an untoward accident, which had disabled him for a considerable time, had prevented his doing so ; but his mother observed, with a rather scornful feeling of disappointment, that he seemed not only unconcerned, but even gratified, by a circumstance which ought, according to her views, to

have caused him the deepest chagrin. Raymond went on again after an instant's pause, with a mocking smile :

'What need had I to ask thee that, as though I had not known what sort of cobwebs have been spinning in thy brain these many years. For me, I take not shame to say that I have more mind to stay at home tranquilly than to roam so far over seas and mountains, and leave my bones to bleach on the hot sands—all that I may play at hazard with the black men for a prize which has such a magic trick of slipping out of one's hands again—ours to-day, and theirs to-morrow. No ; I thank the kindly star which hindered me from that ; and I think, too—and there are more of my mind—that our King himself, and all who have gone after him, would have shown their wisdom better in keeping still, and looking each man to the things that are his own already, than in starting again on that wild errand, whence there is no profit to be drawn.'

'And is it for worldly profit that all those noble knights and valiant warriors, with thine own father amongst them, have put their lives to hazard, my son?' asked the Baroness mildly.

She seldom remonstrated now, when Raymond made such speeches as these, though they always saddened her ; but his light tone seemed to jar upon her more than ever to-day.

'In good truth, madam, I venture not to pronounce for what they went,' replied the young man carelessly ; 'for it is a thing that passes my poor wit.'

His mother sighed, and bent over her work again. She knew that it was useless to discuss these things with Raymond ; and, indeed, she had had many opportunities of learning how impossible it is to reason anyone into a state of feeling. Yet, why was Raymond's feeling ever of so low and mean an order—he the heir of a noble house ? Louis put her unspoken thought into words when he said, with more energy than he had yet shown :

'Raymond, one might think it was the blood of a churl that ran in thy veins, for they are a churl's thoughts that thou dost harbour in thy heart. Thou hast no more care for thine own glory than has that pretty toy they hung at my side, that I might play with it, and call it a sword !'

'Very likely, brother,' answered Raymond indifferently; and then, as though not unwilling to change the subject, went on: 'Why, there was a ring of thy old tone again! How long dost think to lie here keeping such lazy state? Is it in such fashion that men brace their limbs and sinews?'

'I would have risen but an hour ago, but my mother would not suffer me,' replied Louis, with a return to the old peevish tone; and his mother hastened to interpose.

'Louis is too feeble by far for such an effort yet.'

Perhaps as much in capricious opposition to his mother, as from any real indulgence for Louis, Raymond warmly supported his fancy, putting aside the doubts of the Baroness with an indifference which nearly approached contempt; and she really felt herself almost compelled to yield to their desire. After Louis had been dressed, however, with no little difficulty and a great deal of assistance, and when he walked tottering across the floor, while his brother supported him with a species of clumsy good-nature, which seemed to come strangely enough from him, even the mother felt that she could afford to smile at her caution, and might rejoice in the sight of Louis's present pleasure without any fear of its after results. Pleased like a child he was indeed, and his mother congratulated herself that she had been able to bring Raymond to visit him; strange as it seemed that he should have worked a greater change in Louis's spirits in one hour, than her tender indulgence could do in many days. As she watched Raymond's unusual helpfulness, while he stood with his brother before the window in the protecting attitude so natural in their relative positions, yet so seldom to be seen between these two, she thought wistfully how strong a support she might have found in her eldest son, had she ever felt able to trust fully either in his character or his capacity. But Raymond's brighter moods were as transient as the colours of a rainbow, appearing for an instant in the middle of a stormy sky; and the black clouds would soon gather over his mind again as thickly as ever.

The wind was blowing with an almost tempestuous

force, and it whistled in at the casement, stirring Louis's hair, and bringing a faint tinge of colour to his cheeks, but he decisively rejected his mother's anxious proposal that the window should be closed to exclude the air; and she, seeing how much he enjoyed the freshness of the breeze—which though boisterous was by no means keen—had not the heart to insist.

'Hark!' said Louis presently, after he had been listening for some time, with rather an awestruck countenance, to the howling of the wind; 'do but harken to those shrieks and moanings. I cannot choose but think that there may be truth in the tales, which tell us, that it is the forlorn spirits of the dead, who wander through the world riding upon the wind, and wailing ever for their lost homes; if, indeed, these be not rather the howlings of tortured fiends. Mother!' he cried suddenly, in a tone of absolute alarm which startled her, 'that last was surely either a mortal or a demon's shriek.'

The Baroness knew that Louis was subject to superstitious fears to a painful degree, but she had seldom seen him so susceptible to them in open daylight, and in her company; neither did he usually express them so openly, for he had learned very early to think that such terrors were unworthy of a man, and from his boyhood he had struggled earnestly to conceal, if he could not subdue them. His mother was almost frightened at the expression of his face, and tried hastily to soothe his nervous tremors, saying cheerfully:

'To me, Louis, these voices seem to tell of nothing but the wind talking with the trees of the forest.'

Louis was almost shuddering, which Raymond observing laughed heartily, and said in a tone which made no attempt to conceal his contempt:

'Upon my valour, brother, I had not thought thee such a fool.'

'Upon thy wisdom, brother Raymond,' returned Louis, striving to laugh away that mysterious spasm of fear, as soon as he felt its hold upon him less, 'I hold thee for the greater fool between us, in thine utter contempt for all the dark and unknown secrets, in the mysterious in-

fluences that surround us. It is a fair pastime for thee to laugh at me when thou deemest me too timorsome ; but trust me many a thing at which thou canst laugh now, shall make thee tremble ere long.'

Though the words were prefaced by a laugh, they were spoken throughout in an acrid tone, at the last, with an expression of serious warning, at which Raymond laughed again.

'Well,' he said, 'I will laugh while I can, and tremble when I must ; but I hope never to tremble as thou didst, Louis, on the day we took that last unlucky ride together, at the doom the old soothsayer foretold to thee.'

Louis looked at his brother with wide eyes and parted lips, through which the breath came quick and panting ; he seemed even to grow perceptibly paler, yet he did not speak.

'What of the soothsayer, my son ?' asked his mother ; 'thou hast told me nought of him before.'

The question was addressed to Louis, but he did not answer it, and Raymond soon took that office upon himself.

'Twas a grim old dotard, madam,' he said, 'who crossed our path when we first began to penetrate the thicker shades of the forest. He fixed his eyes upon us, and nothing would serve but we must halt to hear him pronounce the secrets of our destiny, which he had learned t'other night, he let us know, from the stars of heaven, or the devils of hell, I know not which. To Louis he told something which affrighted him sadly ; but I myself made no more account of him than I used to do when a raven croaks over my head, though all around me may be shivering with terror.'

'But what said he then to Louis ?' asked the mother anxiously.

'Nay, I cannot tell, for he would whisper his prophecies in the ear of each secretly. What was it then, Louis ? I marvelled at the time that I could not draw it from thee. Why, by this hand, thou art paling again already.'

'I feared the old wizard might do us a hurt if thou

shouldst mock at him,' said Louis, turning a troubled, scared face towards his brother's smiling one.

'But thou wilt tell it to me, dear son,' urged the Baroness.

'He said,' replied Louis, stammering out the words with difficulty, and looking at her with appealing eyes, as though he thought she might have power to reverse the sentence—'he foretold that I should die within the year.'

'Have no fear,' said his mother softly, while her hand rested for a moment caressingly among his black hair; 'do not heed the wild words of a stranger whose senses may perchance be erring or distraught; but place thy firm trust in the mercy of Heaven, which is always sure, and shall guard thee, Louis.'

But though the Baroness tried to speak encouragement to her son, her own heart had sunk with an oppressive fear which she could not shake off, as she heard him repeat the prediction, which she felt she could not look upon so lightly as she wished. Still, she continued to reassure Louis by courageous words, and affectionate caresses, and he allowed himself to be consoled easily, for the time.

'What manner of man was this who spoke to you?' asked the Baroness presently of her eldest son.

'A mad man,' he replied promptly, 'I have never doubted it. An old man he was, with a grey beard and a black gown, and his air and eyes were wild.'

'And what said he to thee, Raymond?' inquired his mother.

'In good truth, madam,' he answered, 'if I thought you would put faith in such foolish matters, I might be loth to repeat it, for I think it will not much please you; but he said to me that I should be the last of my race.'

'Gloomy fortunes truly, your soothsayer has revealed to you both,' said the Baroness, with an effort to force a smile.

She turned her eyes from them, and looked musingly from the window for several moments, watching the changing sunlight. She gazed until she was startled by hearing a strange cry, and, looking round, she saw Louis

falling back in a heavy fit, similar to that which had seized him on the day of the thunderstorm.

Louis's tendency to epileptic fits, which had attacked him at rare intervals ever since his childhood, had seemed to lie dormant during his illness, though his mother had dreaded their appearance from day to day. Their occasional recurrence had not hitherto had the effect of blunting his intellect, which was keen and shrewd enough, though it may have assisted to break his nerves and his temper, and especially may have predisposed him to fits of supernatural terror, such as he had just displayed, and which his mother thought more easily to be explained in the light of a subsequent attack of this nature. Raymond had been compelled to support his brother in his arms, lest he should fall on the floor, and now stood looking very awkward, as he sustained the full weight of the body, which was heavier at that moment than he could have imagined possible ; while the mother bent over him, full of distress and alarm at this return of an old enemy, which she had been tempted to believe vanquished.

Louis was lifted again upon his bed, and his recovery was even more rapid and easy than the Baroness had ventured to expect. Neither did he seem much the worse after the passing of an hour or two, but on the contrary, he was calmer and brighter upon that afternoon than he had been for some time ; but still those fatal fits had again assailed him, and his mother went in constant fear from that day of their reappearance.

Raymond had quitted the chamber some time before Louis regained his consciousness, but he did not ask for him again. The wind was howling still no less dismally than it had done a few hours before, but he seemed to pay no attention to it now, lying very quietly watching the one patch of sky, which was all he could see through the narrow window.

Raymond, meanwhile, went about among his horses and dogs, and took, as usual, his supper and his wine, and in the interest of his various pursuits, Louis was for the most part forgotten. But now and then, in an idle moment, the words of the old soothsayer would return to

his mind, that his brother should die within the year ; and he pondered them again and again. It was not that he felt under any temptation to believe the words as a prophecy ; Raymond's mind had not the least inclination to superstition ; his intellect was too slow, his imaginative powers too undeveloped, to have much fear of any danger which did not stand before him in a tangible shape. Still, though he did not believe the warning, he thought of it several times that day. How like death Louis had looked a few hours since ! The old man was a madman, yes, but might not his prediction be justified notwithstanding ?

CHAPTER XLIII.

FROM that time Louis's fits returned upon him with ever-increasing strength and frequency, and formed, certainly, not one of the least serious features of his case. To his mother they were an actual terror, and she could not help thinking that in one of these paroxysms he must eventually pass away from her care. Yet he did not appear to grow worse, at least, in these early days ; on the contrary, there was for some time a slight but perceptible increase of strength, and he insisted upon leaving his bed almost daily, though it was usually only for a few hours.

He never went abroad, however, or even left his chamber, after he had once unsuccessfully attempted to descend to the lower part of the castle ; and, after some time, when she observed that he made little or no further advancement, while those terrible fits continued to assail him at shorter and shorter intervals, his mother almost ceased to expect that he would ever regain his old measure of strength, or resume the pursuits which had once had interest for him.

This did not seem to trouble him greatly, he was less restless now, and would often sit by his mother's side for a long time, calm and tranquil, with a tranquillity very

different from the deadly lethargy which had fallen upon him two or three months before. At such times he would talk quietly and contentedly, or occasionally he would read with her, for the Baroness had been careful to have him instructed in the arts of reading and writing ; justly thinking that it would be well to surround that blighted existence with as many interests and pursuits as it was possible to enjoy. Louis, naturally of a quick and receptive intelligence, had taken full advantage of such teaching as he had been able to procure ; and his little store of books, meagre though it was, had been long the source of some of his chief pleasures.

Another amusement which served to fill up peacefully many of Louis's vacant hours, was that of listening to the old minstrel who dwelt within the castle, and whose art had appeared the most delightful and serviceable resource, during many a period of enforced monotony. Louis would now often demand the presence of the old man with his harp for hours together ; but though she observed with satisfaction how much this music engrossed and attracted him, it made his mother not a little uneasy to see how melancholy a colour his tastes and ideas were taking ; for however strict her injunctions might be beforehand that the ballads and romances, which were sung, should be of so cheerful a nature as might help to raise, instead of unduly depressing, her son's spirits, Louis could seldom be brought to tolerate anything but such doleful dirges of death, or such heart-broken tales of hopeless love, that even the Baroness had much ado to keep herself from weeping over them without restraint.

Agnes was often in her brother's chamber now, and Louis usually appeared well pleased to have her beside him. The Baroness had sometimes thought her children sadly wanting in fraternal affection, but between these two there was perhaps a closer attachment than existed among the others. Agnes's tender feelings were readily interested in anyone who was feeble and suffering, and so long as Louis was gentle and impatient with her, nothing pleased her better than to constitute herself his attendant, and obey his every wish ; but if he treated her

roughly she would instantly shrink from him, as she shrank from Raymond. Louis, too, was able to appreciate some part of the benefit he could draw from a companion of whose gentleness he was so well assured, and looked with real kindness upon the little sister, who would never mock and gall him with bitter taunts as Raymond did ; or try his temper by serious remonstrance and rebuke, as his other sister had been used to do.

The young Count Maurice de Croissy had by this time visited the castle again more than once. The Baroness was pleased to observe that Agnes treated her lover in a more natural manner, and that he seemed gratified by the change ; but, thinking so, she considered that it would be unwise to speak to her again on the subject of her relations to him. Silence and time would teach Agnes that her mother's counsels had been wise and necessary. The girl herself had been so much relieved by the consciousness that her mother knew her secret, that the greater part of the weight of it seemed to be gone. Her mother, of course, knew what was best to be done ; and Agnes found no great difficulty in falling into her old unembarrassed manner with the young Count, when she saw that it was expected of her. Agnes was always prone to do what others expected from her. She liked Maurice de Croissy very heartily—she had always liked him, and did not object in the least to showing it, since her mother told her it was right to do so. She was still enough of a child to feel that the offence, if there were one, in what had passed between herself and the young knight, was rather against her mother than the Count ; and it had been the dread of the light in which she might look at it which had chiefly confused and embarrassed her throughout. Whether she was beginning to view these things as her mother wished, and whether she had really banished completely from her mind all the girlish fears and fancies which had disturbed it before, time alone could prove ; and the Baroness was content to wait.

After a rather long period of comparative convalescence, Louis began, by slow but sure degrees, to lose all the ground that had been so painfully won ; and every suc-

ceeding day found him, without apparent cause, a little feebler, a little more drooping, than those that had gone before. Then he was no longer able to rise up from his bed each day, as his custom had been of late, and most of the recreations which had lightened so many hours of his confinement were now impossible to him. It was with little hope that his mother saw him stretched once more upon his sick-bed. These constantly recurring fits, no less than his growing weakness, seemed to forbid the indulgence of any sanguine thoughts; and the Baroness fancied that Louis himself was possessed by the same conviction which weighed upon her own mind, and that he well understood how slight a chance there was of his being ever again restored.

Again the mother devoted herself with a saddened heart to the task of soothing the sickbed of her son, which she now felt too surely to be his deathbed. It was lightened for her, if patience and gentleness could lighten it, by the grateful contentment with which he now received all her efforts; for, from this time, the exacting and peevish spirit by which he had been used to try her so extremely, appeared to leave him altogether; and his mother, with continual surprise, watched her Louis, as she had never before seen him, always tranquil, considerate, and content—even, to all appearance, happy. He greeted her always with a smile when she came to his side, but never sought to detain her if she found occasion to leave him, nor showed any reluctance to allow others to attend him in her stead; indeed, he seemed pleased to keep his sister beside him as much as possible.

The Baroness was a little inclined to see, in this remarkable and comparatively sudden alteration of character, a confirmation of her worst fears; and it is perhaps not improbable that, if Louis's mind was filled by the idea that he was drawing near to death, the fancy might have tended to tranquillize a spirit, which had been constantly jarred, and wounded, by the consciousness of its own complete want of harmony with the circumstances that surrounded it. Louis had been so used to look upon himself as a spoiled and worthless thing, cut off by necessity

from all real human fellowship ; that it was natural that the thought of a change, after which he should no longer be the same creature, slighted and despised, yet compelled to scorn himself yet more than others scorned him, should have some effect in sweetening and strengthening his nature. He had lived hitherto like one of no account in his own eyes ; but now the thought had come that he need not always be the pitiful weakling he had so often bitterly called himself ; and the thought sobered him.

He did not suffer much, his mother thought--unless when a paroxysm was upon him, he seemed at ease ; and the malady, under which he sank daily, appeared to resemble more the gradual and painless decay which sometimes puts a close to existence in extreme old age, rather than the fierce attacks of such deadly disease as fights its way into the citadel of a strong man's life. He slept now peacefully ; and these long periods of undisturbed repose did more to keep his mind calm and clear, than any composing medicines his mother could have administered.

Still, though there was no pain to be relieved, and, as it seemed, but little that mortal head or hands could do for Louis's restoration, the Baroness never dreamed of neglecting to apply such means as lay ready to her hand for this end. Physic for the sick was as absolute a necessity in her eyes as milk for babes, or meat and bread for the strong and hearty. Accordingly, most of the simple medicines, with whose merits she was acquainted, were tried in their turn for Louis's benefit ; and he took them from her hands without a word, though sometimes smiling strangely, as though he would have told her that all her pains were wasted.

The Baroness, on this occasion, even brought herself to take counsel with the aged priest, who ministered as chaplain to the spiritual needs of the castle ; though she had been accustomed to speak in terms of no little disparagement of his skill in leechcraft, in the practice of which art she had found occasion to differ from him on several important points. Indeed, the lady had once been heard to say in a moment of annoyance, when a cure

which she had assured herself of effecting had been retarded, as she conceived, by the indiscreet treatment of the Father ; that, though Father Aldrovand was a holy man, and doubtless also a learned one, he was more fittingly employed in reciting his offices, and bestowing spiritual comfort and warning upon those who stood in need of it, than he could be when meddling with drugs and medicaments, which, as the lady very justly observed, might well become dangerous, in the hands of one who knew not well how to apply them.

To Father Aldrovand, nevertheless, the Baroness turned for advice in her anxiety concerning her sick son, as many women will turn in their perplexities, even to those on whose judgment they can place no very strong reliance, rather than stand alone. The Father came to her aid with sundry very learned remedies ; for his surgery was of a somewhat occult order, which puzzled the Baroness not a little when she tried to reconcile it with her own simple ideas upon these subjects ; and he flitted about Louis's couch with constant fresh experiments, by which he vainly hoped to produce a speedy cure. He was an austere and inflexible man, towards whom Louis had always nourished a strong dislike ; but now he suffered his ministrations patiently, and would listen to his exhortations with respectful attention ; though obviously relieved when the priest quitted him. Still, Father Aldrovand's exertions were no more successful than those of the Baroness had been ; and still Louis sank.

When Raymond was told that, in spite of his apparent recovery up to a certain point, his brother's life was almost certainly forfeit, the news startled him in spite of the fancies which had one day come into his mind on the subject. He was accustomed to Louis's ailments—it was no very surprising matter that he should be weak and sickly—but he had never really thought that he would die. Though Raymond had been very far from an affectionate brother, yet he felt now that he did not wish for Louis's death ; on the contrary, he thought that he should miss him somewhat. Louis would occasionally, though

not very often, ask for his brother, and Raymond seldom refused to answer the summons ; but would come and stand for a few moments beside the bed, feeling very little at his ease. He could not understand the new Louis who lay there now, whom it seemed impossible to scorn as he had been accustomed to allow himself to scorn his brother ; and it was always with a feeling of relief that Raymond found himself released from the sick chamber, which, unless specially sent for, he never approached.

Louis's illness was a very long one even yet ; and if it was true that Death was steadily approaching, he advanced so slowly that all the household had time to grow used to the sound of his footfall on the floor. To all it seemed like a time of hushed and solemn waiting, and Louis had the sense of waiting upon him too. One day he questioned his mother with much appearance of interest, concerning the day of the month and the year, and she asked him why.

'I thought of the words the soothsayer spoke to me that day,' he replied with a rather strange smile, 'within the year he said, but the year is not yet over-past.'

'And hast thou let that ill-omened prophecy stay by thee so long ?' said his mother wonderingly, for Louis had never spoken to her like this before.

'It has come into my mind many and many a time,' said Louis, 'and it has seemed as though in truth I saw the old man, stern and awful as he seemed to me on that day. But last night, mother, I dreamed it all again, and saw him in very deed.'

'Dear Louis,' said the Baroness with an anxious look, 'thou shouldst not suffer thy mind to be clouded by frequent dwelling on such gloomy thoughts.'

'Do our thoughts ever fly whither we list, mother ?' asked the young man, taking her hand with a sad smile ; 'nay, but they fly where they will, as the wind does. And, mother, I doubt that your thoughts and mine take the same flight often side by side, though we know it not ; as two swans might beat their wings in near neighbourhood, as they travel through the storm and the night, and yet

they see and hear not, nor know they of their nearness. Why should we veil our minds from each other's sight? for well do I know that you deem as I do of this matter.'

The Baroness faltered, and would have denied this, but she could not look into his eyes, and tell him that she believed his malady would pass away. 'I would not have thee to think thus,' was all she could say; 'it can but sadden and fear thee, and this may do thee hurt.'

'It doth not fear me, mother,' replied Louis; 'I have no great mind to live, I think. My life has never seemed so full and glad that I need groan to let it go. There is nothing that greatly troubles my mind, but that I have sometimes thought I might not live until my father's return, and I would fain see him once more.'

'Oh my son, my best loved son,' said the Baroness, now fairly breaking down in her composure, 'that is now all my prayer.'

'Take courage, dear mother,' said Louis cheerfully, 'he cannot surely delay to come much longer; and when he stands again beside you, will not the gain be more than enough to balance the loss of one perverse and worthless son such as I am?'

'Louis,' exclaimed his mother in a tone of reproach, 'hast thou lost all faith in thy mother's love?'

'Nay, but I do believe you love me more than reason,' returned he, toying with her hand which he had taken, and smiling up into her face; 'but in truth I know not why you or any other should have had regard to such a thing of nought, a cankered stem indeed of the good old tree.'

If the Baroness reflected that thoughts like these had sometimes passed through her own mind, the words may have carried some little sting with them which the speaker was far from intending; but she only said, forcing a smile, for she must strive to keep him cheerful:

'I loved because I loved thee, Louis—may not that be reason enough for thee, as for me?'

'Mother,' said Louis after a musing pause, 'I pray you bid someone raise me for a moment from the cushions that I may look again from the window.'

She lifted him herself, it was no very heavy burden that she had to support now; and he looked, and was satisfied. His eyes fell upon the same landscape upon which the father of the Baroness had gazed a few hours before his death; for Louis now occupied the same chamber in which Sir John had lain, and in which he had died. She told him this, and he immediately rejoined:

‘So, why that is well, then it will do fairly for me to die in after, will it not, mother?’

His constant recurrence to this train of ideas pained her, and seeing that it did so he refrained from further talk of this kind, and listened quietly while she told him of the childish marriage that had been solemnized full forty years ago in that very room, and of the manner of her first coming to the castle, events which she still held in her mind pictured with more vividness than the early memories of childhood usually retain. The tale was not new to him, and perhaps that was the reason that Louis’s attention wandered, for after a time he heard his mother’s voice only, and could not tell what words she spoke, and then he heard no sound at all, and before the voice ceased, he was asleep.

The Baroness was well pleased to see that his eyes were closed; and she stood for some moments watching with satisfaction his regular breathing. Then she crept away and began to step noiselessly about the chamber, doing many little things, and carefully hushing the slightest sound which might startle the sleeper, for Louis slept so lightly. She was alone in the room, it was often her pleasure to be left thus with her son. He had been somewhat better that day, she thought, a little stronger than the day before; if only he would not talk so strangely, as though the thought of death was ever in his mind. Presently she went to the window, and sat down beside it for more than an hour. How quietly he slept! she glanced towards the bed, but it seemed as though he had never stirred since she last left his side. After a time she went again to the bed, and stooped down to look into his face. Surely the figure that lay before her was too still, the face too calm and placid; and in that first look

the mother knew that her son had left her for ever, in his sleep, without a farewell.

She did not fall into loud weeping and lamentation over him, it seemed as though there was a hushed tranquillity in the air which restrained her ; neither did she call for any of her women, or even for Father Aldrovand. For a little while at least she might still keep him to herself, no one need know, and she would have no other there. It seemed as though he was not really gone so long as no eyes but her own had looked upon him ; in telling to others what she knew she would set a seal upon the fact, and give it a more fatal certainty. She would fancy for a little while that Louis was sleeping still ; so she knelt by the bedside, and took one of his yet warm hands in her own ; until after a long while they came and found her there.

It was Agnes who found her first, surprised that her mother had remained so long alone, she crept softly in just before the dusk was falling. The light from a western window fell fully upon the bed, and the first thing that met Agnes's startled eyes was her brother's face looking as Louis had never looked before. Her mother, too, looked strange and still ; Agnes felt as though she dared not speak to her. But the little cry of alarm she had not been able to suppress, had reached the ears of the Baroness, who turned quietly and held out her arms to her.

'Come and kneel beside me, my child,' she said in tones of strange seriousness, 'that together we may pray for thy brother's departed soul.'

Agnes, frightened and bewildered, obeyed like a child.

But that little cry at her entrance had been heard by others as well as by her mother. In vague apprehension several female attendants came one by one, following each other quickly, as the rumour of some misfortune began to spread. The Baroness was disturbed by their loud lamentations, and their bustling presence ; there was none of the former calm within the chamber now ; and as Father Aldrovand entered the last of all, and made his way with a grave authority, through the group of whisper

ing women, she took her daughter's hand, and left the chamber with a slow and lingering step ;—but without a backward glance.

CHAPTER XLIV.

AFTER several days, the funeral of Louis de Drumont was celebrated at the castle with perhaps something less than the usual pomp of ceremony which might have attended the obsequies of the scion of a noble house ; yet with no lack of any observance which appeared necessary for the due respect and honour to the dead. There was perhaps but little of really genuine grief, except in the mother and sister, for Louis had not been much beloved among his father's dependents ; but there was in its place a decent solemnity, and many pitying glances were furtively directed towards the spot where 'the lady' stood, looking more worn and old, as all had agreed, from her labour and anxiety in nursing her dying son.

Raymond, of course, was there with an unusually dark cloud upon his brow, for it was a feature of his disposition, that if his feelings were stirred in any way, that very circumstance kindled him to anger, either against others or himself. Still he had been unusually quiet during the past few days, and had seemed desirous to shun, rather than seek, much converse.

Now it happened, that before the ceremony was half over, many of those assembled in the chapel heard faint echoes of a stir and turmoil in the castle without ; which increased as they bent their attention more fixedly upon it. They could not leave the place, however, to seek for the cause of the noise which had disturbed them ; and it was long before the Baroness and some few others there perceived that anything was passing. Presently whispers began to be exchanged among those who stood nearest to the chapel entrance ; and a certain suppressed excitement spreading itself like fire, nearly every head was turned with expectation in that direction. The murmurs be-

came so loud, at length, that Father Aldrovand suspended the service, and the Baroness herself turned, and looked towards the spot where all other eyes were now looking. There with eyes swimming, between astonishment and tears, she saw the sight for which she had been wearying many months, and even years, for her husband was standing upon the threshold.

He stood there for a moment still, but not in wonder, for he had learned already the reason that had called them together there ; but the Baroness had scarcely time to repress the first eager impulse which had urged her to leave her appointed place, and run to greet him even then, before he walked quietly through the little crowd which respectfully fell back from his path, and came to stand by her side. As she looked up at him, he raised her hand tenderly to his lips, but that was all ; and he signified his desire that the ceremony should proceed. When all was over the Baroness drew him into a private chamber alone, and it was long before either was seen by anyone again.

In the meantime the men who had returned with the Baron, fewer by many a loss than they had been on the day when they had followed him first to Palestine, became the centre of so much curiosity and interest, that they complained they had barely time to draw breath after all their many fatigues, or to snatch a single drop or morsel to refresh their parched throats, before they were called upon to reply to as many questions as would have taken, they said, a wizard ten days to answer. After this representation, however, they had no reason to complain of the backwardness of their companions, in proffering copious draughts of wine, which had so good an effect in loosening the tongues of the travellers, that they in their turn did their best to quench the thirst for news, which burned at least as fiercely in those who had remained at home, as the desire for strong drinks of a material nature could do in themselves.

When the Baron de Drumont appeared once more before his people, they found him less altered than they had been prepared to expect, by the years of his absence. A few

shades more of brown upon his cheek, and perhaps an added touch of gravity in expression and manner, was all the outward change to be remarked in him. Bertram de Drumont had indeed borne the passage of time extremely well—he still looked young, younger than his actual age; while his wife might easily have been supposed to be older by at least ten years than she really was. The Baron's hair was still unmixed with gray, for it was of that fair tint, which is often observed to retain its natural colour for a very long time. His forehead was but little marked by lines of care, for in the midst of such toils and responsibilities, as cannot fail to fall to the lot of every man as he advances beyond middle age, the world had hitherto dealt not unkindly with the Baron de Drumont. But a naturally open and sunny temper had contributed, perhaps more than any other cause, to preserve this appearance of youth; for it is the natural influence of a sour or sordid disposition, to rob the countenance, no less surely than the mind, of its graces, and a man of morose temper may often be seen to age more rapidly, in outward aspect, than the progress of time alone might seem to warrant.

The long-looked-for home-coming of the Baron was indeed saddened, both to himself and his wife, by the loss which had come to them immediately before it; but the Baroness had been so much worn of late that her mind was scarcely capable of supporting the weight of sorrow, and could only accept the rest which had become so needful to her. The Baron himself, though he felt as a father on this occasion, was perhaps not unnaturally less stirred by grief. Poor Louis had not been a favourite son, it was scarcely to be expected that he should have been so; and the father's heart had not been bound to him, as the mother's had been, by those many years of loving service, which had nourished a tender compassion in place of the joyful pride, which might be felt by more fortunate parents.

'Ah, dear wife!' said the Baron upon a morning shortly after his return, as he was walking about the precincts of the castle, while she held closely to his side, for she rarely quitted him if she could help it, in these early days; 'ah, dear wife, but it is rest to be at home.'

'Nay, Bertram,' she replied, shaking her head with a sad smile, 'thou wouldst not have me to believe that thou hast wearied for thy home. Do I not know thy spirit better? Do not I know that the rest and joy, for which it ever craves, is to be found nowhere but by the King's side, or in labour for his service?'

'It is true enough,' said the Baron, 'that it is joy to me to be engaged in the service of the King, for who is there, having such a sovereign to follow, that would not rejoice to cleave to his side? Yet I would not have thee think, my Claudine, that the memories of home can be banished from my mind so easily. Do not the thoughts of every man turn, again and again, to the spot wherein he has left a loved and loving wife? Thinkest thou that there is any that thinks not with longing of the country of his birth, of his native hills and streams, and the speech that sounded in his ears in childhood? He who should bear so careless a heart, must be but an unnurtured savage, and no true man.'

'Thou hast thought of me a little, then?' returned the Baroness, smiling with a little archness. She felt almost like a girl again, walking and talking with Bertram thus.

'As oft as the duties of my charge would admit,' averred the Baron stoutly. 'In such scenes as those in which I have borne a part, a man's mind is not at all times his own to employ as he lists.'

After a little interval of silence, the Baron resumed his conversation in a graver key.

'It hath been a main source of regret to me through these years of absence, that Raymond was hindered perforce from going in my train, as I had wished and designed for him. By the throne of the noble King Louis, I had rather have left his bones behind me to bleach beneath the sun of Palestine, and seen my father's house sink heirless and forgotten into obscurity, before I would have had him miss such an occasion; whereby he might have won honour and renown both in this world and the next, and perfected himself in the uses of chivalry withal.'

The Baron spoke in tones of real vexation, while the

gravity of his expression, and the deeply knitted brows, showed no less that these reflections brought no little annoyance to him.

‘I would indeed,’ replied the lady, ‘that I might have heard such words as these from Raymond’s own lips ; but such thoughts, I fear me, are far enough from his heart.’

‘What, wife!’ said the Baron, ‘has the boy then shown no desire to follow in such noble enterprise ; no chagrin that his arm was withheld from it ?’

‘I would fain say that I had seen aught of this in him,’ answered the mother gravely, ‘and yet I dare not.’

‘Nevertheless,’ pursued her husband, ‘it had been well that he had gone with me, for though it would have gone hard with thee, Claudine, hadst thou been parted for so long a space from both husband and son ; yet well I know that thou wouldst have sent him forth, for the advancement of his honour, without one grudging thought.’

The Baroness did not say how much she should have been relieved by the absence of her son, during the few last years, whatever may have been her thoughts upon it. Indeed, she did not reply at all ; and when her husband next spoke it was to introduce a subject rather embarrassing to her.

‘And what hast thou to tell me of my sprightly young favourite, Maurice de Croissy ?’ he asked. ‘Doth he hold himself in readiness to take the hand of my pretty Agnes, at no distant day ? By thine own bright eyes, my Claudine, the child has grown into a pretty maid, and such as a father may give proudly. She is the only one among them in whom I can see reflected somewhat of thine own face and air.’

‘Oh, my dear lord,’ replied the Baroness falteringly, ‘do not begin thus early to talk of marriage.’

‘It is true that the union must needs be now delayed,’ said the Baron. He spoke very gravely, for his wife had but a short time since been relating to him the details of Louis’s last days ; and his mind now turned for a little while from its busy plans for his remaining children, to dwell upon the thought of that one who was now beyond

the reach of his projects or his care for ever. 'It would indeed be an unfitting thing that the echoes of the funeral chant should mingle with the bridal song.'

'My poor Louis!' said the mother softly, 'had he but tarried with us for one short week longer, he would have gained his last desire. It was almost with his last breath that he told me that his one wish was to see thy face, but once, before he died.'

The Baron bit his lip and frowned slightly, wishing perhaps to conceal an emotion deeper than he was desirous to display. He had never been fully aware of the depth of the attachment and veneration which had been lavished upon him by this son, whom he had been tempted to consider less worthy than the others of a share of his own attention. Louis was his mother's charge, poor boy; she would nurse him and indulge his sick fancies; what could his father do for him? This had been the Baron's unspoken thought, and Louis's morbid spirit of self-depreciation had been encouraged, by his observing that his father scarcely thought it worth while to bestow upon him any of that paternal advice, or instruction in gentle usages, which fell to the share of his brother. The Baron, presently turning to his wife, proposed a little abruptly that they should visit the chapel together, a request with which she readily complied; and there he remained for several moments, standing at the head of his son's grave, in very serious reflection. After leaving the place, he continued his former walk, still keeping his wife beside him; and presently asked her again with rather a forced smile of the young Count de Croissy, and whether his daughter appeared well affected towards him.

The Baroness hesitated for an instant, in doubt whether it would be best to confide to her husband her own anxieties concerning Agnes; but determining in the first place to endeavour to ascertain her daughter's feelings more clearly, she merely replied, a little evasively, that she trusted her daughter was a dutiful child, who would find her pleasure in following the path marked out for her by the kind care of her father. She added, however, that she had been distressed to observe that Raymond bore no

such good will towards the Count, as should in reason subsist between those, who were about shortly to become such near kinsmen.

‘That inconsiderate boy,’ said the Baron, in a tone of some displeasure, ‘is like to breed quarrels among all my friends I think ; this is not the first gentleman upon whom I have heard that he has put affronts. Why, here he comes yonder!’

The Baron took a few steps out of his way in order to meet his son.

‘Come, Raymond, I would talk with thee for a while,’ he said, in a frank and cheerful tone. ‘Why, I have scarce exchanged ten words with thee, since the hour of my return. Shall my son’s voice be the last to welcome me home in safety?’

Raymond, churlish though his disposition was in general, had yet some measure of respect, and even regard, for the Baron ; and he now replied, with an air of sufficient deference, that he hoped his father would not think he was sorry to see him back again, for that would be to do him much wrong. The Baron kept his son beside him for a considerable time, conversing with him on various subjects, and at last took occasion to mention the name of Maurice de Croissy.

‘He is,’ observed he, ‘a young cavalier of courage and honour, and worthy, as I hope, to stand in his father’s place—his father with whom I was long bound together in so dear a friendship. It would be well pleasing to me, Raymond, should I see thee united with this young gallant, the destined husband of thy sister, in an affection as warm and as lasting.’

Raymond turned his head aside, to conceal the dark scowl which he could not at the moment suppress, and muttered something indistinctly that he would fain hope not to disappoint his father, whom it was his wish to please. The Baron, however, had noted his frowning look, and was not satisfied with the expression of a sentiment so conventional.

‘Come,’ he said, “I see thy brows grow dark at the very sound of his name, my son. Tell me what hast thou to complain against Maurice de Croissy?”

'You mistake, my lord,' returned Raymond ; 'I bring no complaint against the noble Count, my most gallant brother that is soon to be. By my faith, I dare assure you that I nourish no more ill will to him, than he for me.'

Raymond was scarcely aware of the bitter tone of irony which his resentful feelings gave to his speech, but his father shook his head.

'There have been some foolish heady boys' disputes,' he said, 'betwixt you, as I plainly see. Such quarrelling is but the pastime of fools, my son, when it divides those who should stand side by side in friendship through life. Take this from me, moreover, that as it well becomes a gentleman to keep his heart and courage quick and fiery, it should be no less his part to check the stirrings of a vain and froward temper, which lead to causeless strife. But I will reconcile thee with Maurice,' he added, smiling ; 'it will be no such hard task, I trust. I warrant me we will wash down all unkindness in a beaker of wine at our next merry meeting.'

'I understand you not, my lord,' replied his son. 'There needs no reconciliation between the Count and me ; we are friends, most excellent good friends, already. This would be a loving world indeed, were all in it linked together in bonds as close, as my brother Maurice and myself.'

Whether the Baron was quite satisfied by this declaration from his son may perhaps be doubted, but he could gain no more from him ; and answered quietly, though with rather a keen look, that, however that might be, he hoped Raymond understood what were the duties of respect, and courtesy, due from him to the guest of his father, and the bridegroom of his sister. He then allowed the subject to drop.

The Barouess made no unnecessary delay in speaking to her daughter, as she had purposed, upon the subject of her marriage ; but was concerned to find that her thoughts were not yet free from the remembrance of her absent admirer, to whom she still seemed to hold herself bound, by the understanding that had grown up between them. She seemed to be literally haunted by the idea

that he would return to seek her out, after the solemnization of her marriage ; and would only cry in response to all her mother's representations of his unworthiness, begging her at the least to do all in her power to postpone the wedding as long as might be possible.

The Baroness now felt that she had no other resource than to give a full account of all this matter to her husband, which she did at once, with some anxiety as to the light in which he might regard it. He heard her gravely to the close, and then walked twice or thrice the length of the chamber in which they had been sitting together, smoothing his moustachios and muttering several inaudible words between his lips the while. This was a little trying to the patience of his wife, who was very desirous of hearing his reply, but presently he turned and spoke to her.

'I am sorry, dame,' he said, 'for my daughter's sake, and for her betrothed husband's sake, to hear these things that thou hast told me ; but for this forward young gallant, who has found it so easy to draw to himself the smiles that belonged of good right to another, thou needst have no further fear of him. The man is dead, and at no great loss either to his country or his order, as I judge.'

'Now, may Heaven forgive me if I rejoice at such tidings !' exclaimed the Baroness ; 'and yet I cannot but feel that there is a burden lifted off. But, is it very sure, my dearest lord, that he is indeed dead ?'

'As sure as that I myself live, dear Claudine,' answered her husband, in a reassuring tone ; and proceeded to give her details of the circumstances of the death of this young English knight, as he had learned them, when he had no cause to suppose that the event bore an especial interest for any of his family. 'Our silly maid,' he added, 'must now divorce her memories from this caitiff perforce ; and will turn willingly, I trust, to her bridal with a cavalier of honour.'

'I fear me,' said the mother, with tender inquietude, 'that my poor child may find some cause for grief in this sudden communication.'

'Better that the girl should weep a shower of tears from her silly eyes,' replied the Baron decisively, 'than that she should live to weep slow tears, from her heart, through all the length of a life-time. 'Tis but a bad business from the beginning, yet it hath ended more favourably than we could have had any fair ground for hoping. Come, we will finish this matter on the instant, and not stand dallying.'

So saying, the Baron summoned an attendant, and desired that his daughter might be sent to him; and awaited her arrival with folded arms and a thoughtful countenance.

Agnes approached her father with sufficient confidence at first, for she was ignorant of the occasion of his sending for her; but her face soon changed to an expression of no little embarrassment and alarm, when he proceeded to acquaint her that he had heard, from her mother, of the passages which had occurred between herself and the young English knight. The Baron then told her, in plain though not ungentle terms, that he whom she had called her lover was dead; so that she was now at least released from all obligations, by which she might once have fancied herself bound to him. It says much for the kindly consideration of the Baron, that he refrained from adding at that moment certain words which came very readily to his tongue concerning her extreme good fortune in being placed beyond any danger of forming an alliance so undesirable; together with a few rather severe expressions upon the folly which had even for an instant contemplated it. This was a matter which he looked on with something of shame as well as vexation, as feeling his own honour involved; but after the simple communication he said nothing more, but silently watched his daughter, as she stood before him with hands clasped—not weeping as he had expected, but with an expression that he could not read.

'Thou must not grieve, my child,' said her mother softly.

'She will not grieve,' said her father very gravely. 'Go, Agnes, and remember that I confide in thy duty, and

that the Count de Croissy confides in thy love. Let nothing that thou dost disappoint that trust.'

Agnes, who had not spoken a single word, glided from the room in ready obedience to her father's signal ; and he observed as she did so :

'It will pass lightly over, I trust ; and it is perhaps well, in view of this unforeseen hindrance, that the marriage must needs be deferred beyond my first intent.'

The Baroness narrowly watched her daughter's demeanour, both upon that and several ensuing days, though never speaking to her on the cause of her solicitude. Agnes seemed at first to seek to be alone, and to shrink away from companionship, especially that of her mother ; probably on account of the uneasy consciousness that she had known all her secret so well. Soon, however, as she resumed her more natural air, the Baroness took leave to hope that the intelligence, so suddenly conveyed to her, had affected her less than she had feared it would. The girl had appeared more frank and at ease with Maurice de Croissy, upon the next occasion of their meeting ; and there was nothing to indicate that she cast a regretful glance backward upon the past. It seemed, indeed, from her whole behaviour, that she had looked with more of fear, than longing, for the return of the young English cavalier ; who had drawn her towards him rather by the almost forcible attraction of a strong will, than by any softer influence.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE Baron de Drumont, though he had thought proper to delay his daughter's marriage for a season, was nevertheless anxious that it should be celebrated as soon as circumstances would permit. The young Count de Croissy, who had been a more frequent visitor at the castle, since the return of its lord than he had been before it, was by no means inclined to place any difficulties in the way of the accomplishment of wishes, which matched so well with his own ; and Agnes herself showed no reluctance

as her wedding-day approached more and more nearly. It was the mother, perhaps, who had the most legitimate cause to dread the arrival of that day, which must rob her of her only remaining daughter ; but she was too anxious for the welfare of this cherished child, and too happy in the prospect of seeing her future safety assured by means of an honourable and advantageous marriage, to permit herself more than an occasional sigh, over the loss which she was herself about to sustain.

The preparations for this important event were many and bountiful, even magnificent ; for the Baron was desirous, no less as an assertion of the consequence of his own house, than in a fitting regard to his future son-in-law, to celebrate the occasion by a splendid festival. The necessary arrangements for the marriage occupied the time and thoughts of the Baroness, and all her women, for weeks beforehand ; and a busy fluttering importance was imprinted upon the countenance, and air, of everyone among the female inmates of the castle. For very many years no bridal had taken place there, never indeed during the memory of any then living ; and the women, young and old, showed themselves eager to make the very most of the present occasion.

Upon the morning of the destined day, the stir and bustle of preparation commenced almost before the rising of the sun, and seemed only to increase as the day advanced. Towards noon the Baron and his household had placed themselves in readiness to receive the expected guests, who were to grace the festival ; and a temporary lull succeeded to the busy hum and chatter which had filled the place but a short time before.

Everyone was of course arrayed in his gayest braveries to do honour to an occasion like the present ; the Baron himself, though in general he looked with indifference upon mere outward magnificence of attire, had not disdained to bestow more attention than usual upon his toilette ; and was now dressed with care, and even taste. Indeed, though simply fashioned, and almost devoid of ornament, his habit, which was composed of velvet of a deep prune colour, was so well assorted with his fair com-

plexion and hair, and sat so well upon his upright figure, that it seemed as though no more magnificent dress could have suited him so well. Every part of his dress was of the same sober colour, without variation ; and but for the jewelled clasp which fastened the drooping purple feathers in his velvet bonnet, it was entirely destitute of ornament.

The attire of the Baroness was less happily chosen ; for she had cast aside, in consideration of the character of the day, the black robes which were now her usual wear ; and the richly-embroidered gown of deep crimson by which she had replaced them did not become her well. She looked harassed and ill at ease ; and there was a nervous restlessness in her manner, a lack of the calm and stately bearing befitting her rank, which prevented her appearing to advantage. Agnes had beendressed, by her mother's desire, completely in white ; and a garland of white blossoms confined her hair and shadowy veil. She looked unusually well, and her father's eyes rested on her with pride, as deeming that the gift he was to make to his friend, was one as well worthy of his own bestowing, as of the Count's acceptance.

After some time Raymond sauntered carelessly in to join those who were assembled to receive the shortly-expected guests. He had evidently given himself no concern, as every other inmate of the castle had done, of whatever degree, that his dress should be such as to do honour to the occasion they were met to celebrate, or to set forth his own person to the best advantage. On the contrary, Raymond de Drumont had rarely been seen so meanly attired ; and it seemed as though the plain, ill-fitting, and well-worn hunting-suit in which he was carelessly arrayed, had been selected purposely to show how slightly he regarded this festival, which all others did their best to honour. Everyone observed his appearance with astonishment ; for Raymond's taste for magnificence in apparel, and decoration, was so strongly marked, and so well known, that the meanness of his dress, at such a time as this, was even more noticeable than it could have been upon another. Everyone wondered at Raymond's strange

appearance, but no one ventured to remark upon it, until at length it attracted the attention of his father, whose notice he had seemed rather desirous to avoid.

‘Raymond,’ said the Baron in an accent of displeased surprise, ‘I must needs say that thy apparel matches but ill with the day, and with the occasion which calls us together.’

Raymond, a little discomfited, glanced downward at the costume which had incurred his father’s censure, as though it had only now occurred to him that exception could be taken to it.

‘I had no thought of offending your sight, my lord,’ he replied, ‘by the simplicity of my garb ; and truly I had supposed that you paid little regard to such considerations.’

‘There are considerations of what is due to time and place,’ answered the Baron, suppressing an inclination to impatience, ‘which I would not have thee to disregard. I repeat it, that a careless and slovenly dress, at a time like this, must appear to savour of disrespect, as well towards me as to the Count de Croissy, thy noble brother. By my faith, Raymond,’ he continued, breaking into a smile which cast a light over his grave features like the sudden flashing of the sun’s rays upon overshadowed waters, ‘I little thought ever to be forced to preach such doctrine to thee, whose mind, I had always deemed, was too much set already upon thy embroideries, and plumes, and jewels, and such like flaunting braveries. But we lose time ; it is my desire that thou shouldst exchange these unbecoming weeds for attire better suited to this festal-day, and that instantly ! Make no delay, for the wedding guests will attend thy coming, and I would not have thee laggard.’

With slow and reluctant steps Raymond turned to obey his father’s commands ; but he was unable to conceal the vexation he felt, for his eccentric costume had formed part of a plan, by which he designed to show what slight honour he was disposed to pay to his brother-in-law. It was an evidence of the trifling character of his own sentiments, that Raymond really thought to annoy and mortify the Count, by so petty a display of disrespect.

He had scarcely left the hall, before the constant arrival of one guest after another fully engaged the attention of the Baron ; and before long the young Count himself appeared, when the splendour of his appearance, formed the sharpest possible contrast to that which Raymond had thought proper to present, but a few moments before. In respect of the splendour of his accoutrements, and the brilliancy of the colours which glowed upon his person, the Count could be compared to nothing more properly than to one of those gorgeously coloured winged insects, which flit about the surface of some still waters, upon a summer evening.

When Raymond presently returned to join the brilliant company, a still greater contrast might have been remarked in the expression, and bearing, of the two young men. Raymond was now attired in such a manner as to excite no remark, though it was easily to be seen that he had not bestowed that minute attention upon the arrangement of his toilette, which he was accustomed to give to it. His countenance was dark and lowering, and his manner so surly and repellent when he was obliged to speak, that few sought any prolonged conversation with him ; and towards the bridegroom in particular his bearing was cold and sullen.

Maurice de Croissy, upon the other hand, carried such a joyous good-humour in his manner, and such a glow of triumphant pleasure overspread his face ; that the two might have stood in contrast to each other as the respective types of gloom and gladness. No more popular person was there in the gay throng than the bridegroom, who was not so much absorbed in his own happiness, that he could not spare a hearty greeting, or a gay jest, for every individual in the company. His gay spirits overflowed in mirth and good-humour upon all who approached him.

The young Count had been exalted to this state of happy spirits, in the first place certainly by the reflection that this was the day so long desired by him which was to bring him the gift that had been awaited with no little impatience ; but the crowning-point in his felicity came

in the discovery that Agnes seemed disposed to treat him with a degree of warmth and frankness, which would have been sufficient in itself to do away with any lingering doubts and fears, had there been any, of the sincerity and readiness of her kind affections towards him.

Raymond did not fail to observe the general favour which was won by means of the comely person, and attractive presence of his brother-in-law; and the circumstance only served to increase his own ill-will towards him. Unreasonably enough, Raymond, though he did not choose himself to be at the pains of trying to please, yet thought fit to be jealous of the popularity, which his kinsman had acquired, by means of the complaisance and brightness of his demeanour, while he himself remained almost unnoticed; considering it a usurpation of consequence which ought by right to have been enjoyed by himself in that place. Social preference, however, will always continue to be accorded to the most agreeable, rather than to him who conceives himself to have the best right to receive it; and no one noted Raymond's lowering looks. No one, that is, except his mother, who watched him, from time to time, in considerable anxiety. She saw only too plainly that her son was in one of his most black and bitter humours upon that day; and her secret fears often whispered to her that there might be danger of a revival of that smouldering discord, which seldom failed to burst forth into flame, when the young men were thrown into each other's company for any length of time.

The young Count, though he seemed disposed to play the part of host a little more than is quite usual for one in his position, when a man is generally supposed to be too much absorbed in his own emotions to have much attention to spare for any of those around him; yet could not be considered neglectful of his bride. He kept constantly by her side, and after every sally intended to augment the mirth and good fellowship around him, his eyes returned to dwell upon the face of the bashful maiden by his side; and his lips were ready to whisper such words of assurance, or gay encouragement, as he

thought best adapted to her mood. It was little wonder that he should think she stood in need of some support from him ; for Agnes, unaccustomed to be called upon to play a part in so brilliant an assembly, and embarrassed still more by her novel position, shrank nervously from the gaze of the many eyes, which were fixed upon her on the present occasion, and obviously derived more pain than pleasure from the gallant festival, which had been assembled to do her honour.

The high-wrought tone of spirit, which made Maurice de Croissy the life and soul of all the mirth in the festal company, sprung from an excitement which might be turned almost as easily to emotions of quite an opposite kind ; and thence it followed that he found Raymond's antagonistic bearing harder to be endured than usual. Raymond on his part, was never backward in trying his patience by some injurious taunt, or intentional slight ; if he could do so without incurring the notice of his father ; for the young man, however little respect he might bear to any other person, was usually careful, if he disregarded the Baron's wishes, that it should be behind his back ; and his morose and surly temper was seldom too hot to be restrained by considerations of policy. Nevertheless, he found enough occasion to provoke the young Count to such a pitch, that between the strangely combined influence of his resentment, and joyous exultation, he felt almost as much under the influence of intoxication, as though he had drunk deeply of the wine-flask, though his lips were yet dry from it ; and Agnes was not a little alarmed by such passages of this by-play as fell under her notice. At the end of several hours therefore, the young men began to regard each other with such fiery eyes, as two savage beasts might cast upon each other, when after pacing for some time, side by side, in watchful and suspicious companionship, their fierce instincts begin to stir within them, and they appear ready at last to seize each other by the throat.

The Baron de Drumont, busied among his guests, and somewhat preoccupied besides, had not observed the rising discord between his son and the Count ; but his wife's

eyes were more watchful, and it was her touch upon his arm, that called his attention at last to the fact, that high words were passing between the two, just at the time when the company was preparing to assemble round the supper-table. The Baron strode hastily to the spot, and demanded the cause of the difference ; but for a moment received no reply. Raymond stood scowling in silence, and seemed unwilling to speak ; while Maurice de Croissy, feeling that he had allowed himself to be goaded into a display of resentment, which the occasion rendered particularly out of place, appeared no less reluctant. One of the bystanders now repeated to the Baron certain injurious phrases, which he had heard Raymond apply to the Count, and which he alleged to be the original cause of quarrel. He added in a lower tone, as though confiding the sentiment to his beard, that to his mind, the Count de Croissy had shown but too much patience towards an evil-spoken caitiff, who should have been made to eat his words before he swallowed his supper. The Baron deemed it prudent, since the worthy gentleman appeared not to have intended this remark to reach his ears, to disregard the last words, which perhaps did not exactly please him ; but turned to the two young men, who were unable to dispute the accuracy of the account he had received.

The Baron looked doubtfully and seriously upon his son, whose sullen and defiant air seemed to promise no very pliant and docile humour. Vexed and disturbed, and even angered though he was by this public broil at a season so unsuitable, the father considered it unwise to strain his authority too far at such a moment ; he knew that Raymond was not in a fit condition to listen to the dictates either of reason or of duty ; that he needed indeed as light and cautious a hand for his guidance, as a fiery and restive horse, whose rider can scarcely control, without fear of aggravating, his evil spirit. He thought it best to pass the matter off as lightly as might be possible.

‘Raymond,’ he said, assuming more calmness than at that moment he felt within, ‘thou hast already forgot, it

seems, the converse we held together but a few days after my return from the Holy Land. Yet I am loth to believe that thou couldst, of a fixed intent, do aught which should injure the honour, or affront the friendship, of the noble Count, from this day forth thy brother. This cannot be, for those of so near kindred are knit together in so close a bond, that any insult or wrong suffered by the one kinsman, can only redound with equal force upon the head of his brother. I can believe no other than that thou hast been transported beyond thyself, and into forgetfulness of the observance, and kindness, which is owing to the husband of thy sister, by some sudden heat of passion. My lord, and now my dear son,' he added, turning towards Maurice de Croissy, who had been standing silent with a very moody face, his hand playing with his sword hilt, 'believe me, it grieves me much that you should have met with any cause of offence beneath my roof upon such a day ; and more than all that it should come from one bearing my own name. I pray you to take the hand which I now offer on behalf of this young springal of mine, and to receive the excuse which he will be ready to make to you himself, when his blood is something cooler.'

The young Count, who had been chafing with bitter mortification, under the public affronts put upon him by Raymond (he could have endured his attacks in private with much more equanimity), was completely disarmed by this appeal coming from such a quarter. Gratified and touched by the kind condescension of the Baron's manner towards him ; and by the consideration with which he strove to soothe his wounded feelings ; the young man hastened to seize gratefully upon the hand extended to him, and tried to call up a smile upon lips, still quivering with suppressed agitation.

The Baron, wishing to cement more strongly the somewhat hollow peace, or rather truce, which he had been labouring to bring about, now called for a flagon of wine, which he then offered to the Count, saying, with a smile :

'I would have you and my son to drown the memory of

all contention in this generous liquor, before we turn to our supper. Drink, therefore, first to Raymond's health, and he shall afterwards do honour to your pledge.'

The Count drank in silence, and as he handed the cup to Raymond in turn, the Baron thought that he could do no less than follow the example. The young man, however, was, on this occasion, transported by jealous rage, far beyond the prudent considerations which generally led him to suppress, so far as he could, all manifestations of his malicious humour in his father's presence ; and he dashed the wine from him with an angry gesture, saying, while he cast a dark look upon the Count :

'Drink will I not, neither eat in this presence ; nay, by St. Philip, were he twenty times the husband of my sister.'

He then turned sharply upon his heel, and left the hall. The Baron, who stood in equal astonishment and displeasure, took two or three steps, as though he had it in his mind to follow and recall him ; but reflecting that in Raymond's present frame of mind, his absence was rather to be desired than his presence, which could only lead to further difficulties and embroilment, he changed his purpose ; and turning to his disconcerted guests, who were gathered round in embarrassed silence, he bade them all sit down and make merry, as befitted the day. The merriment of the company had been a little damped by the disagreeable character of the scene that had just been exhibited ; but the Baron, putting a strong force upon himself, made every effort that was possible to revive the former tone of gaiety ; the bridegroom seconded him manfully ; and since few of those assembled had any personal cause for anxiety, in respect to the terms on which the two newly-made kinsmen might stand towards each other, their efforts were soon successful, and the mirth flowed on again as easily as though nothing had occurred to interrupt its course.

There were some, however, who could not regard the matter with so much indifference. The Baroness, pale and agitated, felt almost unequal to her share in the duty of doing the honours of the feast ; so constantly, and with

so many forebodings, did her mind dwell upon the dispute between the two young men, and its possible consequences. This, which should have been to her a day of pure, if subdued, joy and satisfaction, was thus embittered to her in its close by Raymond's uncontrolled and turbulent humours. She had privately sent a message to him, soon after his hasty departure, entreating him to return, to live in peace with the Count, and not to do his sister so much dishonour as to desert her marriage feast, for the satisfaction of a fit of petulant humour. She received an answer almost in the same words which Raymond had last spoken in quitting the assembly :

‘Tell my mother, that I will neither eat nor drink, in company with the man whom she calls my brother.’

At last, much to the relief of the Baroness, and possibly of some other members of the party, the long day of stately revelry wore away. The various ceremonies and festivities, proper to the day, were concluded, and the guests were beginning to fall away one by one ; when Maurice de Croissy found himself at leisure, for the first time, to converse a little while apart, with the silent and downcast lady at his side, now become his wife. Agnes had been wishing for some such opportunity, and gladly embraced it.

‘My lord,’ she said timidly, and he experienced an inexpressible pleasure in feeling her fingers laid upon his arm, while her eyes were raised to his with a look of entreaty, ‘I have been longing to pray you to harbour no resentment against my brother Raymond, in respect of what has passed between you this day. I know that he abuses your patience beyond all bounds of courtesy and reason ; but indeed, Raymond scatters his affronts upon all who surround him, and no one takes heed of him. Do not, I pray you, suffer him to provoke you to more open contention. I could not bear it, that there should be deadly strife, between two so near to me. Will you grant so much grace to your wife upon her marriage-eve ?’

The Count felt very much inclined to grant her anything she asked for just then. He was pleased that she should come to him with a petition, and pleased at the

manner of it, but he had been telling himself for the last hour or two that he had borne with Raymond long enough, and too long already, brother to her, and son to the Baron, though he might be. Maurice de Croissy had a fair stock of patience, and a good temper, but they had been tried almost to the limits of endurance. He murmured some few conventional phrases, in order to satisfy Agnes, with professions of attachment, which were, at all events, sincere, if his protestations of implicit obedience were not. Still she did not look quite satisfied ; and the habitual frankness of his nature induced her young husband to speak more plainly.

‘My dearest bride, and my own lady,’ he said, with a tender pride in this new possession, ‘this is not the first time, by many, that this brother of thine hath permitted the ill-will he bears me, to break forth into injurious slights, and unprovoked insult. Thou hast said truly, indeed, that none are safe from him ; even thyself he has defamed.’

He repeated to her the sinister hints by which Raymond had sought to shake his confidence in her faithful regard. Agnes listened with a frightened face, and when he had finished, she said hastily :

‘Nay, but Raymond erred not altogether in what he said to you.’

He turned a startled look upon her, and it is possible that she wished at that moment that she had not spoken ; but it was now necessary to explain her words, and she proceeded, though rather falteringly, to give some account of her intimacy with the young Englishman, and its results. In doing this she was moved by a momentary impulse, and spoke without reflecting that she had made a very imprudent choice of the time and place for such a confidence. She was, perhaps, still too childish, fully to understand how much there was in her communication to move him deeply ; and certainly had very little conception of the risk she ran in making it to a man in so excited a mood as the young Count then was. She regarded him, as up to that time she had always found him, as a friend, whose indulgence towards her could never fail ; and her

only thought, after the shock of surprise with which she had listened to his last words, had been of the relief she believed she should find in placing full confidence in him, as formerly in her mother ; and thus freeing herself from the oppression of a feeling of guilty secrecy, which had clung about her for a long time, and especially since she had found in what light her mother looked upon her past conduct.

The communication thus imprudently made, however, did not produce such mischievous results as might have been apprehended. Agnes had, half unconsciously, dwelt more upon her fears of the probable return of her foreign suitor, than upon the intimacy of their relations before his departure ; and Maurice de Croissy, too much in love to be inclined to censure any action of hers, was very ready to believe that her wavering allegiance to himself, had been induced by positive terror of one, whom he mentally characterized as a dangerous and treacherous ruffian. The Count was kindly natured, or the Baroness would never have looked upon him with so much favour as the husband of her timid and sensitive daughter ; and harshness towards his wife was never likely to be among his failings. He reassured her, therefore, with cheering words, and in that moment Agnes felt restfully and completely happy.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE bridegroom was interrupted before long in his private conversation by the unexpected approach of Raymond de Drumont, who had entered unperceived, and now, advancing towards him, said, with an indescribable insolence of tone and manner, that he had something to say to him.

‘I have also somewhat of which I would speak to you, Sir Raymond,’ the Count replied with an air of stern courtesy, and rising at the same time from his seat, ‘but not here. Be pleased to walk with me a little apart.’

Agnes watched them move away from her with an in-

definite terror ; afraid to speak, and longing, yet not daring to follow them. She strained her ears to listen for their words, but the whispered colloquy that followed, was pitched in too low a key to enable her to apprehend anything clearly. Now and then she might catch a chance word which fell from Raymond, whose voice was a little less cautiously lowered than that of his companion ; but she could find nothing in them either to confirm or allay her fears, and was obliged to sit waiting, in a state of nervous apprehension, until the Count returned to her. It would certainly have been hard to guess, from the countenances and gestures of the two young men, what was the subject of their conversation. Their manner seemed calm, but earnest ; and even Raymond appeared to have laid aside the air of malicious mockery with which he usually met the Count. This interview, which lasted but a few moments, was unobserved by any other person than Agnes ; for Raymond had entered very quietly, and with an apparent desire to avoid observation, and the Baron, whose eyes might have seen further, was not now present.

Agnes scarcely drew free breath until the moment when she saw her brother move away, and her husband returned towards her with slow steps and a preoccupied air, to be assailed by many anxious inquiries as to the subject of his conversation with Raymond ; inquiries which, however, he knew so well how to parry, that she could gain very little from his answers, and was obliged, though only half satisfied, to allow the matter to rest. The Count, who had looked at first a little graver than ordinary, found himself obliged to summon back his smiles and gay speeches in order to reassure her ; and before their interview came to a close, he had succeeded very well in quieting her vague apprehensions, by the influence of the cheerfulness and carelessness of his own manner.

The question of what was the original cause of Raymond's animosity towards the Count de Croissy, might have been one a little difficult to decide. He himself could scarcely have satisfied it, and the Count had certainly, at the commencement of their intercourse, given him no legitimate cause for ill-will. Yet it was certain that,

almost from the first day of their acquaintance, Raymond had experienced a growing dislike to the young cavalier, who stood so high in favour with every other member of his family. This aversion probably arose, in a great measure, from a vague jealousy of the Count's superiority over himself in almost every respect ; for Raymond, though not in general gifted with much perceptive power, or indeed with much intellectual power of any kind, was yet acute enough to see that he fell far below him in all the qualities by which either esteem or popularity could be gained. Thus he was prepared to resent, as a personal wrong, the superiority of another in those perfections, which he himself was not willing to be at the pains of acquiring ; and in particular he regarded with a spiteful jealousy the rapid advance of the young Count into favour and influence with his parents, whom he suspected, not without some grounds, of entertaining a far slighter opinion of himself. Many persons are disposed to demand as their right a considerable share of esteem and regard, which they will take no trouble to deserve ; and Raymond de Drumont was of this number.

On the following morning Raymond did not make his appearance at all ; and the Baron, who was not anxious to bring about another meeting between him and Maurice de Croissy, was not sorry to remark his absence. Neither did he inquire for him until after the Count, called as he said by urgent affairs, had taken his leave ; till Agnes, half tearfully, half smilingly, had parted from all the familiar objects which had surrounded her from childhood, had received the last embraces and blessings of her parents, and followed her husband into a strange home ; and until they had watched the little cavalcade wind round the hill and disappear in the distance. After his daughter and her husband had left the castle, the Baron sent for his son, but received for answer that he was abroad, and none knew whither he had gone.

The hours of that day dragged as wearily as after a festival they are wont to do, particularly if the festival have marked an important change in the lives of those taking part in it. The Baroness sat near a window for

the whole day, with her half-neglected embroidery, in a reaction of weariness after her late exertions ; and bent most of her attention upon the aspect of the weather, which had been fine and genial in the early morning, but afterwards became overcast and gloomy, so as to make her fear whether her daughter's journey would be accomplished in comfort. The indoor attendants yawned dismally as they worked languidly to reverse the festal arrangements, which had been made with so much of light-hearted mirth ; and the whole aspect of the castle was as much altered, as though a green and glowing day in June, had been suddenly changed to a dull November morning, when, in place of the luxuriant growth of summer leaves and blossoms, the bare earth was covered only by a mantle of thick fog.

The Baron himself, though he affected to be busy over many matters touching the internal regulation of the castle, was obviously little inclined for either sport or exercise ; and would often fall into a reverie lasting for many moments, from which he aroused himself with a start at any outward call on his attention. Sometimes he would wonder, with a little impatience in his tone, where Raymond had gone, and what cause it could be which detained him so long ; for hour after hour went by and he did not return. His followers remarked upon that day that the Baron's temper was a little less even than usual ; and that he showed now and then a degree of testy impatience quite foreign to his general character. One hinted also that he thought his lord had seemed to fail of late by slow degrees, and that he was not now the same man that he had been in Palestine.

The clouds which the Baroness had watched in the morning grew thicker and blacker as the day advanced, and before night-fall had dissolved into a steadily dripping rain. It was a wretched evening, with a constant wailing wind, which blew more chilly than the season warranted, and still Raymond had not returned ; and, though they said little upon the subject, both father and mother felt somewhat startled by this prolonged absence.

At last, at an unwontedly late hour, the Baron was in-

formed that his son had just entered the castle, and that he had gone immediately to his chamber—accompanied by the single attendant who had followed him—without seeking speech with anyone. The Baron at once sent a messenger to acquaint Raymond that he desired to speak with him; but received in return only his son's excuses instead of his presence. The messenger had not been permitted, he said, to see and speak with himself; for the door had been cautiously held half-closed against him, by the surly and incommunicative groom in attendance, who had returned for answer to his message that his young lord was sorely wearied with long riding, and was fain to seek his rest. He prayed his father to excuse him for this night, and to permit him to attend his pleasure upon the morrow.

The Baron received this answer with no less surprise and uneasiness than that with which he had regarded all his son's proceedings on this day; yet for the present he was fain to be content with it. Certainly there must be some mystery calling for explanation in the long and secret expedition which Raymond had made that day; and on which he had been accompanied, not by any person of fitting rank, but by this low-placed groom—a fellow who had been raised higher in the favour of his young master than in the Baron's opinion his merits warranted. Raymond's present conduct had also something strange in it; but the Baron did not choose at that time to insist upon the interview he had desired, and went to his own couch with feelings of undefined foreboding.

Early on the next morning the Baroness was informed by one of her women, with an air of some little mystery, that her son had sent to request that she would visit him in his chamber; and after casting a surprised glance of inquiry towards her husband, who was present and heard the message delivered, she prepared to comply with Raymond's desire. As soon as they had both left the room, and could speak without danger of being overheard, the woman, who had assumed a very important bearing, whispered cautiously to her lady:

‘The truth of the thing is thus, my lady, and far be it

from me to wish to affright you ; but I must tell you that my young lord hath met with a hurt, which I judge it most fitting you should medicine yourself. It would seem that Gregory, his favourite groom, as your ladyship well knows, had tried his rough hand at leechcraft in the past night ; but doubting his own skill in the matter, he hath come to me this morn, begging me to do what I could myself, and to keep silence upon it. But as soon as I had seen with my own eyes how the case stood, I said at once that I would stir neither hand nor foot in it, without your ladyship's knowledge and direction. "Thou knowest, Gregory," I said, "that my lady has the most knowledge of leechcraft of any in the castle, and it is her hand that should bandage this wound, and not mine." Truly, my lord was hard enough to persuade, but I wrung consent from him at last. Now, my lady, you shall be my judge whether I said not prudently.'

The good woman would probably have gone on to give a minute and circumstantial account of Raymond's mischance, had time been allowed her ; but they had reached by this time the door of his chamber, and the Baroness entered hastily, more anxious to see, with her own eyes what was amiss, than to learn it from her gossiping attendant.

She found her son in no such prostrate condition as, after what she had just heard, she very naturally feared to see. He was still lying upon his bed, but did not appear to be disabled ; and though his face was paler than usual, and bore an expression of extreme chagrin and mortification, mingled with physical pain, still there was nothing, as she thought, in that first glance, to call for any great alarm. Raymond did not speak, but looked at her with a half-mortified, half-sullen expression, while she approached his side, saying gently :

'My son, they tell me that thou art hurt.'

'Ay,' he said, with his most bitter laugh, 'I have a hurt. It is your choicest delight, is it not, mother, to salve men's wounds ? Here, then, is that which may try your skill. Can your gentle craft restore the fingers that have been severed from a man's hand ?'

As he spoke he exposed to view his left hand, which had lain concealed under the coverlid, and his mother saw, to her horror, that two of the fingers had been completely shorn away ; and a third as far as the middle joint.

‘Oh, my son, my son!’ she cried, sinking on her knees beside the bed, and keeping her eyes fixed, as though in fascination, upon the sight that was so terrible to her ; ‘where hast thou been ? what hast thou done ? who or what is it that has maimed thee thus ?’

‘Ask me no questions upon it,’ replied Raymond impatiently, ‘but pray you do what you can at once, mother, for this wretched stump ; so that if I must pass through life with but half a hand, it may at least not ache and burn as it doth now.’

His mother proceeded in silence, but with trembling fingers, to apply what remedies she could to the wounded hand, and to bandage it with great care. Then she stood looking down at him doubtfully and sorrowfully, not venturing to speak again, however much she might have longed to question him. His eyes met hers with a kinder glance than usual ; and, reaching forth his uninjured hand, he lifted hers to his lips, with an unwoundedly grateful impulse.

‘The kindest thanks, mother,’ he said ; ‘your careful pains have brought me ease.’

‘Raymond,’ said the Baroness, appealingly, encouraged by his softened manner ; ‘wilt thou not confide in thy mother ? Tell me, I pray thee, how this evil chance has come to pass. Thou hast shown me a heavy sight this day, and much I fear that some dark tale lies behind it. Oh, my son, that I should see thee maimed thus pitifully ! at least thou wilt trust me with the cause ?’

‘I know not why I should not tell it,’ replied her son, with some reluctance in his tone ; ‘for my father will surely seek to know, and I know not how it could be withheld from him. Learn, then, that this same dismembered stump,’ and he looked with a scowl of contempt upon the bandaged hand which lay beside him, ‘is the last of the many benefits you have received from my kind brother, who stands so high in your esteem. This is

a fair service to draw closer the bonds of love and gratitude between two kinsmen, is it not, mother ?

‘Alas ! and has there then been deadly contention—strife even to blood shedding—between thyself and the husband of thy sister ?’ said the Baroness, with an expression of yet more horrified alarm. ‘My unhappy boy ! into what evils has not thy uncontrolled and froward spirit hastened thee ?’

‘Why, see but there now,’ said Raymond somewhat sullenly ; ‘you turn more pale with terror at the bare thought of danger or harm falling upon Maurice de Croissy, then when you saw me maimed. Have no fear, however, for there was nothing of blood-shedding save from my own worthless veins. De Croissy is safe and whole, as when he was flaunting it in this castle but a day since, and rousing the mirth of all the company like a court fool or a gleeman—so you may well rejoice.’

‘Thy speech was an unkind one, Raymond,’ said his mother, in a tone of reproach ; ‘nor canst thou believe that I look with a careless eye upon thy suffering or thy loss. But should I not rejoice that no other evil has befallen ? Had my second son, Maurice, been slain or wounded in this strife, it could not advantage thee.’

‘In good truth, madam, I know not that,’ replied the young man with a moody frown. ‘Think you not that the smart of these bleeding joints might be assuaged somewhat by the knowledge that the hand which inflicted it was suffering the like ? ’Tis said that is an unguent of more soothing power than any balsam or elixir.’

The Baroness made no reply to this half-mocking speech, and there was silence for a few moments ; after which Raymond began to stir and raise himself in his bed, as though he would have left it.

‘They tell me that my father expects me to attend him,’ he said ; ‘and it is time that I should bestir myself that I may bid him good-morrow.’

‘Do not stir,’ commanded his mother hastily ; ‘nay, thou must be ruled by my counsel and entreaty, and keep thy chamber for this day at least. I will speak with thy father, and let him know how things stand with thee.’

After some little show of reluctance, Raymond submitted to her desire ; and she left him at once in order to communicate all that she had learned to the Baron. He heard her tale with an expression of gravity and concern, that grew deeper and deeper as it proceeded : but when she ceased speaking, he only said, in what his wife thought a tone of strange indifference :

‘I thought that foolish boy would bring some sore disaster upon himself or others with his mad humours.’

Having said this, the Baron walked away, and within a moment or two afterwards was standing at the door of his son’s chamber, demanding admittance. Raymond was perhaps more surprised than gratified by his father’s visit ; but he concealed his annoyance tolerably well, and said, with an attempt at a smile, as he saw him enter :

‘If I have disobeyed your summons, my lord, my mother will already have let you know that it was in compliance with her commands.’

‘My son,’ said the Baron, as he approached the bedside, and, taking Raymond’s hand, held it in his own with much kindness ; ‘I have heard with sorrow that thou hast met with a grievous hurt.’

The lightness of the young man’s reply did not respond to the serious tone of his father’s address.

‘I trust you will not grieve too much for the matter, my lord. A doughty cavalier, they say, should laugh at his wounds ; and so I trust to laugh at mine—in fair time, that is, and after this hand has grown a little better used to bearing but a bare half of its due share of fingers. Why, I have known those who will count you off their scars by the score, and make a rousing tale out of each, to make merry with over the wine-cup. By St. Philip ! but it is enough to make a man laugh, too, to think of those same poor fingers scattered loose upon the desert moor like a lost glove, and blown upon by all the winds of heaven ; while the hand they were sheared from, though it lie safe and warm in my bosom, can give no succour to their forlorn state.’

‘You take it lightly, Raymond,’ said the Baron, regarding him with an air of surprised gravity. ‘For me, I

can scarce conceive that any deeper misfortune can fall upon a man than to be doomed to go through life maimed—to lose any one of those members which nature has bestowed upon all alike, and the want of which must unfit him for the pursuit either of duty or ambition, from the labours alike both of war and of peace. Saving the loss of honour, there is no calamity from which I would pray more fervently to be delivered.’

‘Well, my father,’ replied Raymond, whose face had slowly grown darker and darker ; ‘I shall not, I trust, be left in altogether so helpless a case by my mishap ; yet am I not so entirely insensible to the weight of it as you perhaps suppose. Credit me, I could be well content to wreak any fitting revenge upon the head of him, who wrought me so grave a harm.’

‘There is some ugly twist that distorts thy mind, Raymond,’ said the Baron a little sternly, ‘for which I must grieve no less than for the hurt that hath befallen thy body. Thou hast no more warrant to bear an evil grudge against thy brother, because his sword has dealt thee a shrewd blow in fair and equal fight, than thou hadst to provoke him to the conflict.’

‘Nay, my lord,’ replied his son ; ‘for that matter, it was not I who provoked that conflict ; for I went to it only under the Count’s challenge.’

His father put the statement aside with an impatient wave of his hand.

‘I care little,’ he said, ‘whether the challenge came from him or from thee ; but I know well in what injury and outrage upon thy part these causeless disputes had their rise ; and therefore it is that I say thou hast still less of right to harbour any spite against thy brother for the injury thou hast met. Now, at least, I trust to have all these past discontents buried and forgotten between you.’

‘In sober truth,’ said Raymond, glancing down upon his bandaged hand, ‘I think that same kind brother of mine hath given me some good cause to remember him.’

‘My son,’ said the Baron seriously, though in a tone of more than usual affection, ‘I have watched thy course for many years with deep misgivings, and many a hope that

I had set on thee I have seen to fail ; yet would I fain believe that thou bearest me some honour and some love. Nay, I do believe it,' he added, reading a protestation ready to be spoken in the young man's eyes and parted lips.

Raymond had really more regard for his father than most persons might have been inclined to give him credit for, and had been touched by his kindness. This was, indeed, almost the only affection he cherished for anyone, and the difference in his feeling between father and mother might perhaps be partly explained by the fact that the Baron had been the more disposed of the two to look with hopefulness on the character of his eldest son, partly with a man's wider toleration for some moral defects, for which the mother could not find excuse, and partly, perhaps, because he less often saw the young man exhibit himself in his most unfavourable light.

'I do believe it,' the Baron continued, 'and it is as a pledge of that love and honour, that I bid thee now to consent to a sincere and lasting reconciliation with the Count de Croissy. Truly I have had both grief and shame from thy bearing in these past few days, yet if thou wilt do this, dear son, there will be nought left of this unhappy discord to mar the peace of our house ; nothing save that one ineffaceable mark which I must needs deplore to my life's end.'

'It shall be as you will, my lord,' replied Raymond, unusually subdued.

'Why, there can be no further cause for enmity betwixt you now,' said the Baron in a lighter tone ; 'if there have been grudges in time past they have been fought out fairly. I have many a time grasped in friendship the same hand that had met me in a grip of less peaceful nature on the yesterday.'

Raymond made no answer, and his father conceiving him fatigued, left the chamber with a mind rather better satisfied than he had expected upon entering it.

CHAPTER XLVII.

It was upon a fair and sunny morning, towards the end of the month of September, that the Baron might have been seen, accompanied by only three or four attendants, riding at a considerable distance from the boundaries of his own lands. He seemed to be in a complacent, if rather sober humour, as he talked gravely but cheerfully now with one, now with another of his followers; and occasionally turned from them to bestow many caresses and words of encouragement upon the favourite horse he rode, which had become peculiarly endeared to him by many toils, and perils, they had shared together.

On the previous day he had had the pleasure of effecting, as he believed on a tolerably sure foundation, that reconciliation between his son and the husband of his daughter, which it had been his earnest desire to bring about. Maurice de Croissy, by special appointment, had visited the castle upon that day; and Raymond, if his manner could not be called gracious, rather resembling indeed the surly submission of a chained bear, as distinguished from the savage and untamed humour of the same animal when at liberty, he nevertheless consented to receive the hand of his brother-in-law, and to offer his own, with as much cordiality as could have been expected from him, under the circumstances. De Croissy himself, whose placable temper was always ready to take the first steps towards accommodating any difference, and whose good nature led him sincerely to regret the injury he had had the misfortune to inflict upon his kinsman, was very willing to meet him once more in friendly fashion; and not much inclined to criticise, with severity, the abruptness of Raymond's manner towards himself. On the whole, the Baron thought he might be satisfied with the issue of this difficult and unpleasant affair, which was now accommodated at least for some time to come, if not permanently appeased.

This circumstance had relieved his mind, and tended to make his reflections take a cheerful tone in the course of

his long ride upon that morning, when he had purposed to himself to visit his elder daughter in the convent, of which she had now been for several years an inmate, and which was the same as that in which her mother had spent some time during her youth. The mild yet bracing character of the weather, however, and various rural scenes through which they passed, from time to time, had also their influence in cheering the mind of the Baron, who was more than usually susceptible to such impressions from without. Accustomed for so long a time to look only upon the hot and sandy plains of Palestine, interspersed with a luxuriant tropical vegetation, which could carry with it no associations of home to European eyes, the Baron derived a continual pleasure, the first freshness of which was scarcely even yet diminished, in the sight of the almost constant verdure, the shady woods and cultured fields, which now surrounded him. Everything seemed to have a freshness so soothing to the eyes of one who had been long a wanderer in Eastern climes, as the touch of a cold hand laid upon the forehead of a fevered man ; and when, as now, every bush and blade of grass was sparkling with morning dew, while the whole landscape was bathed in the indescribable mellow beauty of a day of early autumn, it was little wonder that his eyes should dwell upon it long and lovingly.

At the same time that his mood seemed so placid and content, the Baron displayed an unusual appearance of fatigue, which surprised his companions. He seemed to take no pleasure in rapid riding upon this morning, but kept his horse at a quiet and even pace, which gave no promise of his quickly reaching his journey's end. This circumstance in itself was enough to occasion some surprise, since the distance they had to travel was so great ; and a squire, who rode close beside the Baron's rein, shook his head as he observed the heightened colour and the quick and panting breath which followed some comparatively trifling exertion. 'My lord is not himself to-day,' he thought.

More than once the Baron pulled up his horse, and brought the whole party to a halt ; but this may have

been less for the purpose of rest, than from a desire to gaze for a few moments upon the surrounding scene, and very soon the horses were in motion again. So slow was their rate of progress, however, that those who followed him began to entertain serious doubts whether they should reach the convent at all that day; although they said nothing, except in whispers to each other, about the Baron's unaccountable delays. It seemed like a day to encourage waking dreams, and the little party moved on as though in a dream, with little apparent desire to reach the end of their journey, and without much care even whether they should find a place of shelter before night-fall. This was not, of course, the first visit which the Baron had paid to his daughter after so long an absence, so that he was the less eager to hasten forward.

Presently, in the course of their ride, they came to a little stream, which flowed over its bed of pebbles with that low murmuring ripple which has sounded so pleasantly in the ears of so many poets. There was one great old willow tree hanging its branches low over it, just beyond the spot where they had stopped, and the air was so still that the water underneath seemed to reflect but one sky of dark green, chequered with the palest shade of blue. The various and changing objects reflected at different points in this natural mirror; the horsemen standing upon the brink; the rankly-grown grass, and low hawthorn bushes covered with crimson berries; the stunted forms of the trees standing lower down the stream, grown into all sorts of fantastic shapes, and half smothered with ivy; all these, together with the faint distant blue of the cloudless sky, unchanged except when the flight of some bird crossed it for an instant, formed a pretty sight, which might have seemed well worthy of a few moments' attention; but the Baron did not pause to look at it. Almost as soon as he had reached the margin of the water he dismounted hastily, and, kneeling beside the stream, drank with all the eagerness of a man under the influence of excessive thirst.

'Here is wine, my lord,' said his esquire, surprised to

see his master take such deep draughts of the pure and tasteless liquid.

He was yet more astonished when the Baron rejected his offer of the more generous beverage, but continued to quench a thirst, which seemed almost insatiable, with the waters of the brook. The squire, as he watched him, began to feel uneasy. It was all very well, he argued, for a man to wet his lips with pure water now and then ; a short draught upon a sultry day might often prove refreshing ; but to see anyone quaff it thus without measure, and with more eagerness than if it had been the choicest vintage of Cyprus or Bordeaux, was surely something strange, and not altogether as it should be.

When at length the Baron had not only satisfied his mysterious thirst, but had bathed his head and face also in the stream, as though he had found the warmth of the day oppressive, though it was not greater than seemed to become a genial morning in early autumn, he mounted his horse again, in readiness to pursue his way ; but even then he paused for several moments to look around him. He appeared refreshed when they again rode forward, and maintained a rate of progress rather more rapid, than that which had pleased him before for some little time.

After a while the Baron's horse, which, though gentle and manageable enough under the hand of his master, was yet of a high and fiery spirit, grew, as it seemed, a little weary of the slow and gentle pace to which he had been constrained for so long a time, and became a little restive, though not so much so that the Baron would have found, under ordinary circumstances, the slightest difficulty in controlling him. Just at present, however, he seemed in some way unequal even to a task which should have been so easy to him ; the horse sprang aside, stumbled slightly over some trifling obstacle that lay in his path, and before his startled attendants had time to perceive that there was any danger of such an accident, they saw their lord thrown suddenly from his seat, and lying on the grass before them. Greatly alarmed, all sprang at once to the ground, and pressed around him to ascertain whether he had met with any serious injury in

the fall, but he laughed, and, raising himself on his elbow, protested that he was whole and sound, as, indeed, he said, he should in reason be after so soft a fall. He confirmed this declaration by rising to his feet and taking several turns to and fro, with an ease and freedom of movement, which entirely removed their fears upon this account.

The Baron now expressed his wish that they should remain for a short time, in the place where they then stood, to take some refreshment and rest, though the fatigues of their journey hitherto, had not been so great as might have seemed to render a halt for this purpose altogether necessary. The spot which had been selected for their resting-place was upon the summit of a gentle slope, covered with grass of a fresher and softer kind than ordinary, which the liberated horses were already beginning to crop with very evident tokens of pleasure ; but completely bare of any other kind of growth. It was flanked upon either side, though at a considerable distance, by dark and thick woods, stretching away as far as the sight could reach, but before them there lay a wide prospect of considerable variety. Scattered here and there over the landscape stood human dwellings, contrasting quite as sharply with each other as the habitations of man can do, with the dismal dens tenanted by the lower animals. There stood the cumbrous pile of some old castle, rising in its towering pride far into the sky ; and below it the peasants' huts, which looked far more like the hillocks of earth thrown up by some burrowing animal, than houses built by men for their own accommodation. Still farther on, the sun gilded the thickly-clustered roofs of a little town, whose inhabitants were enabled to live in rather superior degree of comfort.

The trees, which were sprinkled profusely over the plain, served to give an agreeable shade to the half-tilled fields, in which men might be seen at intervals working like busy dwarfs ; and where the great birds, which were pecking in the ground at a safe distance from them, looked as though reduced to the same size as the beetles for which they were searching. Even such wretched

cultivation as there was, however, had only been expended upon a portion of the land ; a full half was still unreclaimed from barrenness, and stretched away in undrained marsh or tangled waste, where wild shrubs and herbs of all kinds grew, in sufficient profusion, to betray what a rich reward might here be found by man, in return for the expenditure of a little labour. Still the waste ground, however little it contributed to the productiveness of the soil, gave a pleasing variety to the landscape, which must have been missed if the spade and the plough had done their work in reducing it to the same level with that which lay beside it ; for under that mellow sunshine no scene, however wild, could ever have looked dreary or barren.

Upon the slope, where the travellers were resting, there were no trees to afford them any shelter from the sunshine ; but this was of little consequence upon so mild and delicious a day, when the sun sent forth only such a degree of gentle warmth, but as could be agreeable even to those exposed to the full influence of his beams. A medley of sounds was brought to their ears from the various centres of human life below, the clanging of bells, the lowing of cattle, or the indescribable confusion of noise issuing from some castle court, sometimes even the shouts of men became distinctly audible ; but all these sounds were so softened and toned down by distance that they could not disturb the sense of solitude, and retirement, that hung about the place. Sounds, however familiar and even harsh, when heard in close neighbourhood, may often appear to have an agreeable and soothing quality, coming from afar.

When the little party began to eat and drink, the Baron made some little show of tasting the food which was placed before him, but in reality he only trifled with it, and covered his want of appetite by conversing cheerfully with his companions.

‘ Well, Philip,’ he said to one of the men-at-arms who had gone with him to the crusade, ‘ how does the fresh and temperate air of our own fertile Normandy please thee, after so long wandering amid the inclement heats of those Eastern climes ?

'Oh, for that matter, my lord, it pleases me well enough,' replied the man, 'and I have as little taste for being roasted alive as any man; but I think, under favour of your lordship, that I could have been well content to tarry there over seas until we had finished what we went to do. It irks me to come home with empty hands; and I cannot but think it an unseemly thing, that Christian men should sit in peace at home, leaving those accursed heathen hounds to work their devil's will in all those holy places. Thanks to the saints who lent strength to my arm, this right hand has despatched a round score or two of them; and I hold that for the best work it has ever done.'

'Thou art right, good fellow,' said the Baron, leaning forward with a light in his eyes, and speaking in tones of peculiar earnestness, 'and I too should have wished to remain upon the field till the work was done, if so it might have been. My native land is dear to me, yet I call Heaven to witness that I never wished to turn aside from the glorious path on which I had entered, that I might the sooner take my ease. No, I gave my heart as well as my hand to that holy cause; and would have stood to it there till I had grown feeble and tottering with age, had it been possible. Still,' he added in a lighter tone, 'these matters have been settled without thee, Philip, and I think that thou, or any other breathing creature, must needs rejoice to quit a burning furnace, for thine own wholesome native air.'

'The air is sweet enough, truly,' replied Philip, 'aye, and fresh enough too; and indeed, my lord, upon our first arrival, methought the kisses of these northern winds came upon my cheek but coldly, after the warmer ones which had been wont to fall upon it in those sunnier climes.'

'Out upon thee, man!' said the Baron; 'hast thou grown so soft under the eastern sun, that a good honest northern breeze can make thee shiver? Now thou wilt tell me, perhaps, that thou hast ever heard beyond the seas a sound more sweet than the song of the robin, who was filling our ears with his dainty minstrelsy but now.'

‘For that matter, my lord,’ answered the stout yeoman, ‘my ears have little judgment upon these questions of sweet sounds. I leave that to your lordship and others above my degree, who have knowledge in it. For my own part, were it not that his trilling has had power to please you, I would listen to the croak of a frog, with as much content as to a bird’s song.’

‘Come, then, thou difficult fellow,’ returned his lord, laughing, ‘cast thine eyes upon that scene spread out before thee, and see whether it is not more pleasing to the sight than any they ever fell upon in Palestine.’

‘It is well enough, my lord,’ said Philip, gazing over the wide prospect with a rather slighting regard, ‘to have the dwellings of Christian men before one’s eyes again; but for the matter of what is growing on the land, I have seen trees thrice as tall as these, and all lower bushes, and in due proportion, in the Holy Land, let them call it a sandy desert as much as they will.’

Philip turned away from the contemplation of the distant prospect, with a little air of superior disdain, which was perhaps assumed to raise the value of his experience in the eyes of his comrades, who were less travelled than himself; and again the Baron laughed.

‘Thou art far beyond my converting,’ he said, ‘and if thou hadst thy deserts should be exiled again to that furnace of a country till thy life’s end. Come, friend Eustace, what thinkest thou of this matter?’ he continued, addressing his squire, who had also followed him to Palestine.

‘I hold with you, my lord,’ replied the young man. ‘Any man, who could think or speak slightly of his native land, is no true Norman. For my own part, I should be as ready to do battle with any, who should deny the supreme beauty and excellence of this same fair Normandy, as though he had impugned the charms of my lady.’

‘Why, that is a brave word, Eustace,’ said the Baron, with a smile; ‘and thou art right. A true knight should carry the name of his country graven upon his heart, side by side with that of his lady. I trust to see thee keep ever in such a gallant mind.’

'It is but reason, my lord,' said Eustace; 'and, truly, I hold the first obligation the more binding of the two, since a man is perforce attached to his country by ties, not only of chivalry, but of blood; and since she is the common mother of us all, I owe her all honour, as well as service, as a dutiful son. But, my lord, is it now your pleasure that we should get to horse again? The day wears late.'

'Not yet,' replied the Baron, stretching himself upon the grass in a more easy position; 'I feel strangely weary, and would rest a little longer.'

The three men-at-arms exchanged looks with each other; and the squire ventured upon a deferential suggestion.

'Were it not well, my lord, if you feel yourself fatigued, to turn at once homewards, and leave this visit to the convent to be paid on another day?'

'No,' answered the Baron, glancing at him a little keenly. 'Why saidst thou that?'

'Only that the day is more than half spent, and we have yet by far the longer half of our ride before us,' replied the young man.

'There will be time enough,' said the Baron, with a slight touch of impatience; 'and even should it come to our couching beneath the open sky to-night, it is a thing that I have often done before, and need not dread to do again.'

'My lord, your horse,' began the squire, stammering a little under the difficulty in which he felt himself of expressing his meaning without giving offence—'your horse appears somewhat restive this morning.'

'And I cannot rule his spirit, thou wouldst say,' interrupted the Baron, ill-pleased at this indirect allusion to an occurrence he would willingly have forgotten. 'No more, Eustace; leave me to rest now, and in a few moments we will take horse again.'

He seemed indisposed to converse further, and his attendants drew off to a little distance to wait his pleasure, amusing the interval by talking among themselves. Their discourse naturally fell, from time to time, upon the strange demeanour of the Baron, who continued

to lounge for a considerable time upon the soft grass, which formed a couch so captivating to tired limbs ; and the sun was perceptibly lower in the horizon before he spoke again. At last, with an effort, he shook off his lethargy, and directed that they should prepare to go forward immediately—when all was ready, he himself would come.

In no long time the men were mounted, and only awaited the presence and commands of the Baron, in order to proceed upon their journey. The squire went to acquaint him that all was ready.

‘My lord,’ he said, ‘the horses stand waiting, and the men are mounted.’

There was no reply—the Baron had fallen asleep. He spoke again, more loudly :

‘My lord, the horses stand waiting, and the men are mounted.’

Still there was no response ; and the squire laid his hand on the Baron’s arm, and even shook it slightly. He did not wake ; and the young man, startled and alarmed, seized the hand, and looked anxiously into the face of his lord. He was dead !

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE widowed Baroness de Drumont sat alone in one of the upper chambers of the castle. She was usually alone now — indeed, must she not walk always alone through what remained to her of life ? Her existence had centred hitherto in that of husband and children ; but of all that had surrounded her only a short time since, Raymond alone now remained ; and Raymond was but ill fitted to be the support of his mother. The Baroness felt as though the whole of her little world had crumbled into fragments around her, leaving beneath her feet one solid point of rock, upon which she stood alone beneath the bare sky.

A month had passed since the Baron’s sudden death ; but the widow scarcely took note of time. The breath

of her life, the very purpose and motive-power, which had inspired it with energy, had given way suddenly, and left her nerveless and powerless. Her hands, which had once been busy, were now folded idly on her lap; for what was there to do which was worth the doing? She had no one to work for—no one to please.

Day after day she sat thus, doing nothing—scarcely even thinking—only feeling that there was a great blank around her, and she had nothing to do in it, but to watch the sun rise and set on each night and morning. At other times restless fits came upon her, and she would consume the hours in wandering through every passage and chamber in the castle, back and forth; but still in the same dull and leaden apathy, which seemed to smother even natural grief. There were those who whispered that unless the mood of the Baroness were quickly changed, she would not long retain her reason.

Raymond had appeared considerably sobered by his father's death, and treated his mother at this time with more deference, and consideration, than she had ever met from him before. But he found little time for attendance upon her, even if he were likely to prove a more efficient consoler; and it was not likely that a prolonged residence in the castle, when under his rule, could ever be agreeable to her. Already all things were altered for the worse, the old retainers said sadly among themselves; and the new lord was like to prove a man of a different mould to his father, or his grandfather.

The reveries of the Baroness, upon this morning, approached more nearly to the character of settled thought than they usually did. She was thinking at this moment vaguely of Agnes. If she could have her by her side again to fondle, and to think and plan for, the world would not be so utterly empty. And, indeed, if either Agnes or Louis had been left there to divide her thoughts and claim her cares, it is not likely that she would ever have sunk into such a state of hopeless and dangerous depression. Agnes had paid dutiful and affectionate visits to her mother more than once, but that was cold comfort. What the mother wanted was her child-

daughter back again, to be all her own. If only she had not married !

All at once there flashed into the mind of the Baroness the memory that she had another daughter ; and she began to think of Claudine. She had not seen her for some time, and now she began to wonder whether Claudine could help her to fill up her life, with some new purpose. The Baroness herself felt that it would be impossible to continue to live as she had been living of late. Claudine had given up at her very entrance into life all those things, the loss of which had now left her mother desolate ; what had she had in the place of them ? The Baroness knew this, or thought she knew it, already, and the thought seemed to bring a new light into her mind, which revived many old memories. One fixed purpose at least grew out of these musings, and when she lifted her weary head from her hand and rose, it was with a definite intention of doing something—she had determined to go to see her daughter.

The woman to whom the Baroness communicated her desire that the needful preparations should be made for this journey, was no less delighted than surprised to find that her lady had thus awakened to action, and to hear her speak again in her old tone of authority. The project of visiting the convent met with cordial approval from this attendant, who, as she hurried away to execute her lady's wishes, observed to herself in a congratulatory tone that this plan was the wisest that could have been thought upon ; for, without doubt, the convent was the most fitting place for those who were weighed down heavily by care ; and who so likely to bring comfort to her poor lady as her own daughter, and she a saintly nun ?

Raymond also was well pleased to hear his mother express so natural a desire, and readily provided the necessary escort for her journey. The day was not yet so far advanced that it would not be possible to reach the convent before night-fall ; and the Baroness knew that she might trust to the hospitality of its walls for shelter during the night. She set forth, therefore, with as little delay as possible, and pushed on at a good pace, which

she was able to maintain for a long time ; for the pre-occupation of her mind, and impatience to arrive at the end of her journey, prevented her from feeling any fatigue. The cloudy October day was very dull and calm, and could shed no charm over the landscape on this morning ; but the Baroness, closely veiled, and with eyes bent always downwards, took no note at all of the scenes that surrounded her, and could not have told at the end whether she had been riding through a lonely desert, or a peopled land.

The fresh air and brisk exercise, however, of which she had been deprived so long, had wrought some change in the Baroness, and by the time she alighted at the convent gate her cheek was not quite so colourless, nor her eyes so dim. All the scenes which surrounded her had a strange familiarity so soon as she had been admitted within the convent ; but her mind was not sufficiently disengaged to find room for any definite memories of the past. The Prioress who had presided over the establishment in those days, the aunt of the Baroness, had now been dead for many years ; and her successor came forward to receive the noble lady with all honour and great kindness—kindness which was rendered the more heartfelt by a sympathetic consideration of the forlorn state of her guest as a widow, as well as by a startled perception of the rapid change which had taken place of late in her face and bearing. The Baroness could scarcely collect her thoughts sufficiently to respond in a fitting manner to this affectionate reception ; her only desire was to be left alone with her daughter.

Now when that time came, however, and she found herself face to face with Claudine—as she still persisted in calling her, unable to frame her lips to the name which had been given her at the time of her taking the veil—the Baroness felt as though she had nothing to say in this interview, which she had come so far to seek ; but sat with tightly-clasped hands, and dull eyes which took little heed of anything around them, even of the child whom she had not seen for nearly a year past. But the sight of her desolation appealed more strongly to Claudine's heart

than the most affectionate greeting could have done ; and throwing herself upon her knees by her mother's side, she clasped her in her arms, caressed and cried over her, until the poor lady laid down her head upon her child's breast, and wept as she had not done since that night, when the tidings of her husband's death had been brought to her, without one word of warning, or an instant of previous alarm.

'Ah, child,' said the mother presently, raising her head and looking into the face of her daughter, whom she still held by both hands, 'thy father was a most true and noble gentleman.'

'He was so,' replied Claudine. 'Mother, my prayers have been all for him, since first I learned what sad chance had befallen.'

There was silence for a few moments ; the mother could not pursue this theme, and the daughter also felt a shy reluctance to dwell upon it. Claudine, or Sister Angélique, as she was called in that place, had now risen, and remained standing beside her mother's chair. She was a very young woman, little more than twenty years of age ; but there was in her air and countenance something which gave an impression of a strength to help and to support, in which many broken-spirited sufferers had found consolation. It was not a beautiful face that was now turned, with an expression of grave solicitude, towards the mourning Baroness ; but it was calm and serene, and full of the strength that comes from steady sense and earnest purpose, with clear kindly eyes that were quick to read the truth, and lips that could smile readily on occasion, though now they were set in grave lines.

'Mother,' said Claudine, after she had silently observed the Baroness for some time, 'I fear me that you have harboured and nursed this bitter grief, until it has done you deep injury. Dearest mother, you are changed indeed within these few short months.'

'The months have been filled with days of bitterness, Claudine,' replied her mother. 'Do you bid me not to nurse my grief ? It is my playfellow, the friend of my

bosom. What else is there that remains now that husband and children have left me?"

"Much, dear mother, there remains much!" answered Claudine in firm and hopeful tones.

"The sun is gone out in heaven, child," said her mother wearily; "and would you yet bid me to seek for more light?"

"The glorious sun shines where he ever did!" exclaimed the young nun, pointing through the window to the garden without, where the setting sun had broken through a thick curtain of clouds, and was now shedding his latest beams upon the trees and grass in a flood of light, which almost dazzled the eyes of the Baroness as she gazed. "Mother," continued Claudine, turning her eyes bright with a different light full upon her mother's grief-worn face, "think you that my father, if he had stood upon this earth a lonely man, stripped of all that he had ever held dear, would have drawn back from the pursuit of honour, or deemed that life held nothing more for him of price—that the sun had faded from his heaven and left all his future days shadowed over with the thick darkness of nothingness—while there was worthy fame to be won, or foul wrong to be redressed?"

"Thy father was a man," replied the Baroness, her own eyes brightening a little. "He was a belted knight, and a noble of rank and name; bound to that pursuit thou speak'st of by ties of honour, which he could not break for shame. I am but a woman, and women have nothing but their love."

"And have women also no share in the high purposes by which this world must grow in wisdom and in holiness?" asked Claudine, blushing vividly with enthusiastic feeling. "There is another love than that which they lavish on husband or children, friends or home. Have I not seen women here who have lost all these, and more than all, but have walked from day to day contented and serene, their hearts full of holy thoughts, and their hands of loving service? No, while I have a faith to which to cling, and there are unfortunates who look to me for succour, never will I call myself desolate."

The Baroness looked at her daughter in surprise, even while she felt herself stirred in some degree by her words. She had always known that Claudine was good ; from early childhood she had recognised in her aspirations, which she had felt to be beyond what she herself could fully sympathize with ; but she had seldom heard her speak in a strain of so much enthusiasm, for Claudine, in her girlhood at home, had been a little shy of expressing herself fully, where she fancied her sentiments might not be quite understood. Her mother had always looked up to her, and now she said almost humbly :

‘ These sayings are for thee, and such as thee, who are like to the saints, my child ; they are too lofty for me to climb to.’

‘ Mother,’ cried Claudine, half indignantly, ‘ will you tell me that I am like to the saints, and you stand far beneath them, when I know the pure thoughts that dwell in your mind, and the rich store of love that your heart holds, ready to be turned from a frozen fountain, which can but chill your breast, into a stream of fair, sweet water, to refresh all who approach you nearly ?’

‘ I would I might dwell always by thy side, Claudine, and then I truly think it might be so,’ replied the Baroness, looking at her daughter with admiring eyes.

‘ If you could dwell always beside me,’ repeated Claudine slowly, raising her eyes from the ground with something of surprise, but more of joyful satisfaction in their expression ; ‘ and would you then, in truth, seek a peaceful refuge from your many cares in joining yourself to our order ?’

‘ If the few remaining years of the life of a grief-stricken woman, be a gift worth offering to the service of heaven,’ answered her mother, simply and gravely.

Claudine did not reply, but kneeling again by her mother’s side, covered her hands with kisses ; and the Baroness, drawing her close, held her for some moments in a fonder embrace than she had ever before bestowed upon this child, whom she now told herself she had hitherto regarded too slightly.

‘ Thou hast now fixed me in this purpose, Claudine,’

she said at length ; ' I had some thought of it as I came hither, but it was vague and wild, for my mind was not then in case to form a sober judgment. Thou hast cleared the confusion of my brain, and armed me with better courage.'

It was growing almost dark, but still they lingered in grave conference, until they were obliged to separate ; and the Baroness again bestowed a clinging embrace upon the child, from whom she now parted unwillingly, saying :

' Farewell, then, for this night, my daughter ; my sister soon, I trust.'

The Prioress, when she again saw her guest, was astonished to see the change in her manner and expression, which had been worked by that interview with her daughter. She said to herself that the good sister Angélique, whom she had found occasion before to distinguish from the rest of the sisterhood, had certainly a most precious gift of consolation, if she had power so far to brighten the dimmed eyes, and lend vigour to the languid footsteps, of this afflicted and widowed lady. The kind Prioress was unfeignedly glad to observe this good result, she was pleased to see the good gifts of her nuns manifest themselves ; and she bore a sincere goodwill towards the stricken lady, whose sorrows she could pity, if she could not fully understand them. At an early hour the Baroness retired to rest, leaving the Prioress still unsuspecting that her guest of a night, contemplated a more prolonged residence, within the walls of the convent.

The reflections of that night, however, and those of many succeeding morrows, did nothing to change the resolution of the Baroness, and accordingly, after the lapse of a short time, she retired into the convent ; the restraints and confinement of which had been so impatiently endured by her in her girlhood. Here she lived for many succeeding years, which, by degrees, as she became habituated to her new course of life, grew to be peaceful and contented ones ; and here at last she died at an advanced age.

Raymond was not ill-pleased by the course his mother

had taken, for he found her constant presence an unwelcome restraint, which, if it could not effectually hinder his will, could yet interfere somewhat with his enjoyment of it. Under his rule the retainers of his father found all things greatly altered, from what they had been in the old days; to which they looked back with affectionate regret. Raymond de Drumont lived and died unmarried, and in his person the family of his father sank into extinction, the only descendants of the blood being the children of Agnes, the wife of the Count Maurice de Croissy.

THE END.

Pp. 447.—Price 7s. 6d.

A BATTLING LIFE;

CHIEFLY IN THE

CIVIL SERVICE.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY, WITH FUGITIVE PAPERS ON SUBJECTS
OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE.

BY

THOMAS BAKER,

OF THE INNER TEMPLE, BARRISTER-AT-LAW ;

AUTHOR OF 'THE LAWS RELATING TO BURIALS,' 'THE LAW OF HIGHWAYS,'
'THE MAGISTRATE'S POCKET GUIDE,' ETC.

Excerpts from the TIMES and other Press Notices.

'Mr. Baker's autobiography may be read with advantage ; it has some passages worth pondering over. His papers on subjects affecting the body politic contain many useful hints and suggestions.' * * * 'An interesting record of an active and varied life, and of opinions on many subjects on which a special study or personal experience gives Mr. Baker a right to speak with authority. There are few who will not find much to interest and amuse them in this pleasant little book.' * * * 'Within self-imposed limitations Mr. Baker has produced a volume of interest, and we venture to think of permanent value. His pungent account of official jobbery and of the methods of the Civil Service, is written with a great deal of sarcastic power. Mr. Baker's substantial volume is of great interest and public utility.' * * * 'This is a lively book.—T. B. is evidently a shrewd, earnest-minded and determined man ; and he must have enjoyed a great deal of warm, not to say hot water, in his time. The book includes records of several educational battles. It is worth reading.' * * * 'His book is amusing and indeed instructive.' * * * 'Mr. Baker's record is instructive and of practical value. The writer is an ardent supporter of many modern social improvements, in some of which he was an active pioneer. Many interesting topics are touched on in this Autobiography.' * * * 'Mr. Baker has had a pretty wide experience of the Civil Service, the work is in some sort a revelation of life behind the scenes in these matters ; and one cannot but feel that if Mr. Baker had dared to tell all he knew it would have been supremely interesting. As it is, it is very suggestive to those who know how to read between the lines.' * * * 'The glimpses behind the scenes of official life are at once instructive and entertaining.' * * * 'Mr. Baker has spent a long and useful life chiefly in battling against official and other abuses, and in serving the state in various honourable capacities, in the Board of Health ; the Royal Sanitary Commission ; the Salmon Fisheries Office ; the Burials Office, etc. Throughout his official career, he signalised himself by detecting abuses and instituting various useful, financial and other reforms. His opinions are entitled to be received with great respect. He is a veteran reformer of the old fearless and unconventional order, and the world is all the better for the lives and influence of such

men.' * * * 'At the Bar, in the Civil Service, and in a variety of situations, Mr. Baker has truly led "a battling life." He is an old-fashioned Liberal, a hater of Bureaucracy. Everybody will allow the force of his remarks upon that astonishing Parliamentary Procedure which allows Eight Million Sterling to be voted in half an hour, after a long night consumed in every sort of irrelevant twaddle.'

In four volumes, 1s. each.—Sonnenschein and Co.

A FIRST HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PEOPLE.

BY

AMY BAKER,

ASSOCIATE OF THE COLLEGE OF PRECEPTORS, AND OF THE FRÜBEL
SOCIETY.

1. ANGLO-SAXONS TO HENRY III.
2. EDWARD I. TO ELIZABETH.
3. JAMES I. TO REVOLUTION.
4. WILLIAM III. TO VICTORIA'S JUBILEE.

Excerpts from the SPECTATOR and other Press Notices.

This history 'Will be certain to interest children in the doings of their ancestors, as it is no mere dry skeleton of facts, but has the life and movement of living reality.' * * * 'Miss Baker's art in telling her story is such that no reader will wish the story shorter; the tone of her teaching cannot but be beneficial to the young, for it is always noble and worthy of the historian of a people who live in the light of Christianity, and whose responsibilities to mankind are so peculiar and so great.'

'We do not remember reading any book of history with such keen pleasure as we have derived from the perusal of these four volumes of Miss Baker. The style is attractive, because it is picturesque and vivid. . . . We note with pleasure the well-chosen poetical mottoes which head the various chapters.' * * * 'The selection of events and personages is judicious, and the language in which the tale is told is simple, striking and fresh.' * * * 'The aim of the author in limiting herself to the mention of only the greatest names and events is so good that one hardly likes to speak of omissions.' * * * 'We are very much in favour of a book like this, which deals fully with the events in a limited period. Full justice is done to that part of the subject which treats of the Church—St. Bernard and the Cistercians, St. Thomas and the Benedictines. The book will make a capital alternative history reading.' * * * 'Her history, written in simple, straightforward English, of a kind which all will understand, reads like a story. It is admirably designed to enchain the interest; and at the same time accuracy has been nowhere sacrificed to effect.'

